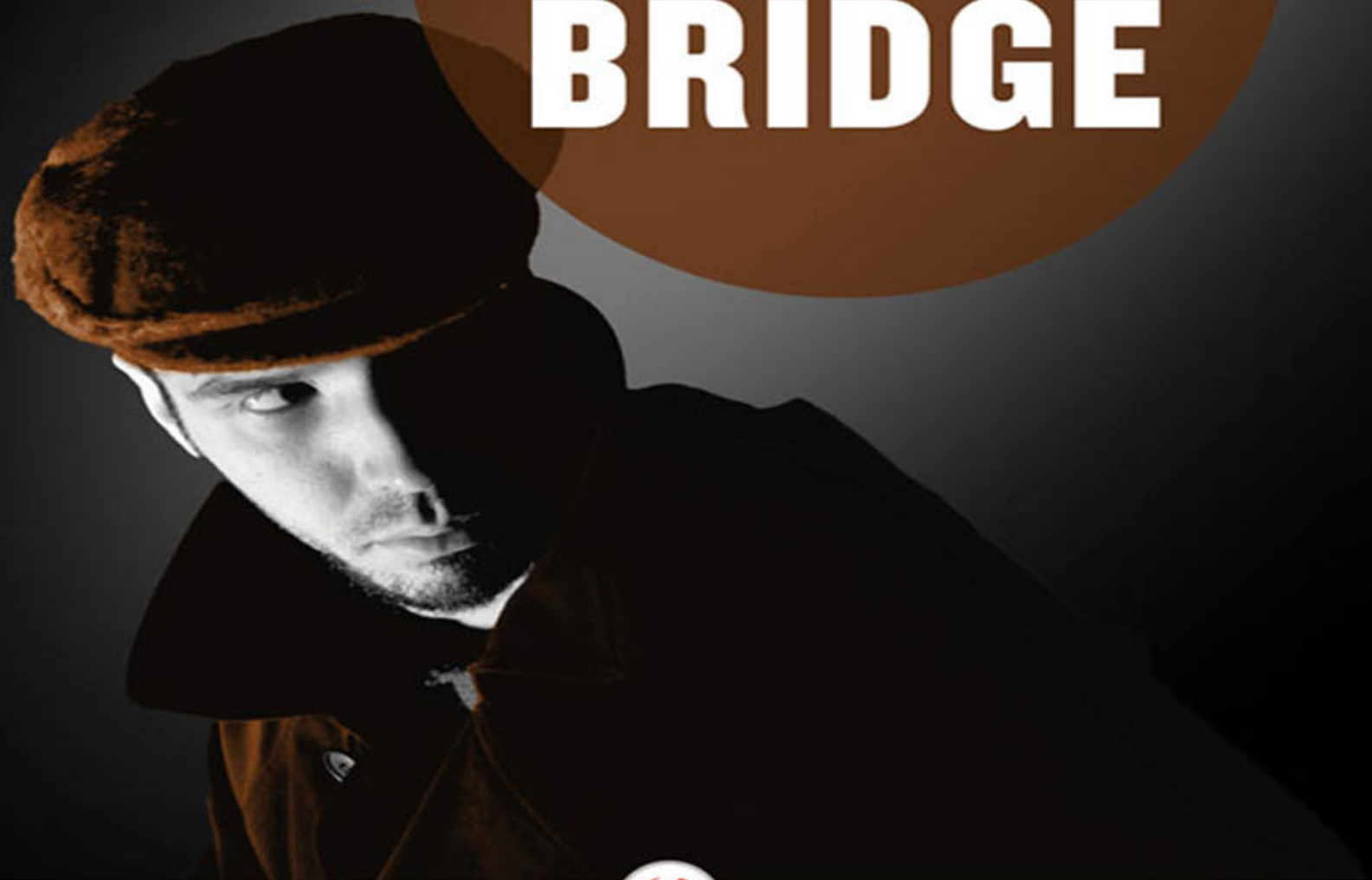


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GEORGE BELLAIRS

THE CRIME AT HALFPENNY BRIDGE



The Crime at Halfpenny Bridge

A Thomas Littlejohn Mystery

George Bellairs



MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM

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CHARACTERS

Michael O'Brien, Mate of the *Ynyslan*.

Ted Creer, Mate of the *Mannin Veen*.

Sam Prank, a hand on the *Bluebell*.

Superintendent Hoggatt, of the Werrymouth Force.

Harriet Prank, aged 82, of 27 Pleasant Street, Werrymouth.

Jane Prank, her cousin and housekeeper.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred Dabchick, of 25 Pleasant Street.

Dr. Isaac Swann, Police Surgeon.

Dick Tebb, Keeper of the Halfpenny Bridge.

Mrs. Govannah and others, householders in Gas Street.

"Captain" James Sprankling, Executor of Harriet Prank.

Clarice Toke, Friend of Jane Prank.

Titus Jackson, County Coroner.

Lady Bromiloe, Leader of Werrymouth high-society.

Canon Conant, Priest of the Holy Name.

"Rosie" Lee, a shady newsagent.

Tobias Tinline, dealer in animals and dog-meat.

Ted Breeze, Tom Kitchin, hands on the *Bluebell*.

Captain Fred Cobb, of the *Bluebell*.

Rev. Micah Scewbody, Pastor of the Burning Bushers.

Mrs. Pratt, a café proprietress.

Miss Hoskins, Almoner of the Samaritan Hospital, Werrymouth.

Fred Kissack, Janitor of the hospital.

Sister Thomas, on the staff of the Samaritan.

Theodore Boake, Headmaster of St. Jude's.

Arnold Podmore, Deputy Headmaster of St. Jude's.

Schofield, Spivey, Bentley and A Boy with no top teeth, Pupils at St. Jude's.

Nancy Emmott, of Headlands Farm.

George Emmott, her Brother.

Saul Emmott, their Father.

Mercy, maid at Headlands Farm.

Stephen Winterbottom, a Veterinary Surgeon.

A red-haired kennel-maid.

Bertie Tanner, Clerk to the Werrymouth Justices.

Ancient and modern mariners, policemen, tenants and tradesmen in

Pleasant Street, Burning Bushers, etc., and

Detective-Inspector Thomas Littlejohn, of New Scotland Yard.

Detective-Sergeant Robert Cromwell, his Assistant.

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I

THE ARRIVAL OF THE *JOHN ANDERSON*

SATURDAY night, October 23rd, 1943. The clock over the bar of the “Welcome Home” at Werrymouth struck ten-thirty.

“S’ten minutes fast,” stammered a hopeful toper lolling across the counter.

“Last orders, please,” cried Chopping, the landlord, fiercely, as though challenging anyone to contradict him.

Chopping was tired and wanted to be rid of the whole noisy lot of them. Hastily his customers drank-up and gave their final orders to Gus, the potman, and the pumps at the bar began to thud rhythmically as the barmaid filled a lot of half-washed glasses and tankards. She, too, was fed-up after a long and busy week and a dip in a bowl of dirty water, tactfully kept out of sight, and a wipe with a sopping rag was all she was giving the returned empties.

The small sailors’ pothouse had one big public room and now, after a lengthy and crowded session, the atmosphere was like that of a turkish bath, opaque and moist. The fug of rank tobacco smoke caught in the throat and reddened the eyelids. The patrons looked like shades hanging about the misty waters of the Styx, with the huge Chopping ready to row them across and the buxom barmaid, Pearl, there, with her unctuous curves and mass of peroxidized hair dark at the roots, to see them all comfortably embarked.

In an upper room, the local branch of the Eccentric Order of Oddfishers was winding-up a quarterly meeting of its Fo’c’sle, that strange passover which no outsider might share, by singing a hymn. The Oddfishers liked to cover their activities with a thin veneer of piety, but their singing rarely began until they were well-oiled and sentimental.

“Lead, kindly Light....”

Some of the patrons at the bar below smiled crookedly and jerked their big thumbs upwards without, however, saying much. Sailors are superstitious and make no mock of propitiation in any form....

There had been nothing exciting in the little pub that night, for there was nothing special tied-up at the quay right opposite the front door. Sometimes when a coaster put-in after a trip longer than the average, her crew, crazy for beer, would get out of hand.

The high-spot of the evening had been the solemn passing-round of the hat for the dependents of the crew of the *Abram Grimes*, which had foundered during a storm last week. £2 13s. 7½d. had been raised and given to Chopping for disbursement.

Two men who had been drinking together in one corner rose unsteadily and made for the door. Both wore peaked caps and reefer jackets.

One of them was Michael O'Brien, mate of the *Ynyslan* out of Cardiff and moored at the old quay where she had been discharging coal. A little wiry Irishman with a short concave nose and cheeky green eyes. He spoke through his teeth, almost without moving his pointed undershot jaw. He was full of energy and gesticulated elastically not only with his hands; his feet and legs were busy, too. Slapping his palms together, stretching wide his arms, strutting about, and elevating himself on his tiptoes, like a performing monkey.

O'Brien's companion was Ted Creer, mate of the *Mannin Veen*, taking on bricks at the harbour for consignment to Peel, Isle of Man. A huge tongue-tied Manxman, with a nose which seemed to have been punched flat and then resurrected by a drunken surgeon.

The Irishman was not carrying his liquor as well as the Manxman. He was getting a bit maudlin and tuneful.

“Dear old pals, jolly ole pals,
Clingin’ together in all kinds of weather...”

The huge Creer looked painfully bashful, smiled at the company awkwardly and raised an enormous paw in valediction.

“Goo’ nigh’, all,” he said and steered his pal through the swing doors, followed by a chorus of farewells.

The pair passed into the night. It was as dark as pitch outside, but there was still plenty of noise. Two other taverns adjacent to the “Welcome Home” were also winding-up their week with a song.

“Puttin’ on a feller as is six foot three,

And 'er only four foot two....”

Piano playing, singing, screaming, the clink and clatter of glasses resounded along the waterfront on which the pubs stood. A chaos of sound like a concerto for several pianos composed in a frenzied modern idiom with an accompaniment of strange wind and percussion.

O'Brien and Creer emerged in a brief flood of light from the blacked-out door and amid heavy blasts of alcohol and hymns.

There was nobody about on the quay. It was high tide and the riding-lights of a few boats in the harbour bobbed high above the cobbled sidewalk. Dimly the two revellers could make out their own ships with two or three R.A.F. and Naval launches and a little fishing-boat or two tied-up alongside.

The small port of Werrymouth stands on the River Werry which is navigable at high tide as far as the old bridge, with its three stone arches, about a quarter of a mile upstream. The old quay extends from this bridge half-way to the breakwater. One side of the river jammed with tall warehouses; the other jumbled with three pubs, a Chandler's shop, coal merchants' yards, an old house or two converted into offices and store-rooms.

Lower down begins the new quay, a concrete extension of the old one. Where old and new meet stands the Halfpenny Bridge, so-called because those who use it pay a small toll to the Corporation of Werrymouth for a short-cut. It saves the legs of anybody wishing to get to the select Hardstone Head district of the town, otherwise accessible only by way of the old bridge, which puts a mile on the trip.

Halfpenny Bridge is of the swing variety and moves noiselessly and ponderously to allow the coming and going of traffic staying in dock more than a day and hence relegated beyond it to the older quay.

The bulk of Werrymouth's present wealth is not, however, derived from harbour dues and profits. The town behind the little port is a thriving holiday resort and annually sprawls farther and farther into the surrounding country.

The two mariners stood on the dark quayside shaking hands, pawing each other affectionately, unable to part company. The officer on duty at the swing-bridge could hear their prattle as he sat in his pay-box at the gate

drinking tea from a blue enamel can. He had nothing much to do but couldn't desert his job lest some vessel might suddenly decide to leave the inner harbour and wish him to open the bridge.... He slapped his hands on his haunches to warm himself, for the off-shore breeze made a draught in his den.

As the wind gradually rose the ships in the basin began to bump each other and their rigging, masts and blocks groaned and creaked.

The bridge-keeper strolled from his cabin, beat his hands, stamped his feet and sniffed the air. He was bored stiff.

Then from beyond the breakwater the siren of a ship sounded.

The man on the Halfpenny Bridge nodded to himself sagely. The *John Anderson* out of Werrymouth, returning home with cement from Bristol. He'd expected her this tide. Hopefully he peered into the gloom in the direction of Hardstone Head. The lighthouse should be on at any minute.

The Hardstone Head light ceased to function normally when war broke out, but traffic entering Werrymouth on the night tide had merely to signal and it was turned on until they had got their bearings and safely negotiated the treacherous Werry Roads.

Just as the bridge-keeper was waiting for illumination the sounds of a newcomer echoed along the quay. Heavy, crisp steps, as though someone were well-pleased with himself. The keeper and the two mariners did not pay much attention to this new arrival, for it was turning-out time at the taverns and at any minute the whole area would become a drunken pandemonium.

A clock in the town struck ten-thirty.

The *John Anderson* blew another double blast on her siren, like a lost thing bellowing for friendly help.

The sounds of the rollicking feet ceased.

The beam of the Hardstone Lighthouse stabbed the darkness. Its glow was like a liquid through which the objects in its path swam slowly.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four. Four fingers of light, spaced equidistantly, feeling through the blackness. Then, five equal two-second dark periods. One by one the four horizontal pillars crept over the sea, round Hardstone Head, and along the quay. The eyes of the three spectators followed them....

In four brief instalments was illuminated as by lightning, a scene which first paralysed, then galvanised the onlookers. It was like the four separate exposures of a camera.

The first beam disclosed on the dockside, about fifty yards from the bridge and a hundred yards or so from the tipsy sailors, two forms, which the speed with which the light flicked on and then off them seemed to transfix into a tableau, as when a moving-picture is suddenly halted, revealing a single group of still life.

One of the characters of this strange drama was a burly form in a cloth cap and wearing a jacket over a sailor's jersey. The other, with fist raised as though striking his companion on the head, wore a felt hat which, with his murderous attitude and slighter figure compared with the one he was assailing, was all the onlookers made-out in the brief, lucid moment in which the scene was lighted.

The darkness seemed even deeper after the first flash, and the spectators found themselves wondering briefly whether they had seen aright or were suffering from some hallucination or mirage.

"And what might those two be doin'?" asked O'Brien.

The second beam clinched the matter before the words were properly out of the Irishman's mouth. It showed one figure, that in the hat, dragging the one in the cap to the edge of the dock. The light slid away; there was a splash and the sound of running feet. The third flash from the lighthouse swept over an empty stage again.

At that moment the pubs turned-out. Shambling, chattering figures emerged. Women screamed and laughed hysterically and men cracked jokes with them and handled them with alcoholic familiarity. The three who made up the audience of the crime ran to the spot where they judged it had occurred.

It took the two fuddled mates some time to decide what to do. O'Brien, the more drunken of the two, wanted to retire into the blackout and avoid being mixed-up in the affair; Creer, though shy and of few words, was endowed with a large bump of curiosity and the fatal spot drew him like a magnet. He dragged his pal with him. The bridge-keeper was already down the stone steps which led to the water-line of the basin and at the edge was flashing a torch, the battery of which had seen better days.

The two sailors fumbled their way down after him. The Providence which guides the feet of drunkards seemed to prevent them from toppling off the steep and slippery steps and joining the one they were seeking in the dark pool.

“Anythin’ we can do?”

“Wot’s up?”

“Somebody tumbled in?”

Inane questions were fired at nobody in particular by members of an excited knot which had formed on the causeway.

The custodian of the bridge had boarded a small rowing-boat and was paddling round, fishing haphazardly in the water with a boathook.

“Somebody fetch the police and a doctor.”

A lamp was turned-on by one of the onlookers and illuminated the dismal scene.

“What’s goin’ on here?” shouted the voice of the Law, which had just appeared, apparently from nowhere.

The bridge-keeper, intent on his task, had hitherto been dumb, but now he yelled back.

“Just saw one bloke push another off the quay and run off. Looked like a sailor to me....”

“Thasrigh’,” chimed-in the two mariners in chorus.

“... better get some grappling-irons ...’ere, wait a minute. I got somethin’.”

The constable hurried down the stone steps. The spot where the man in the boat was fishing was a kind of pool created by two ships end-on and another alongside the gap between them.

The fisher in the dinghy was grunting from his exertions. The constable unmoored another little boat and pushed-off to join him, skilfully paddling with one oar. By an ungraceful effort the bobby clambered from his own to the other craft. Together they dragged aboard a body oozing with dark water and as limp as a sodden sack of flour.

The policeman turned-on his lantern, for that of his comrade in the boat had already given up the ghost. There followed a sharp gasp from both of them.

“Good Lord! It’s Sam Prank!”

The light revealed, calm but ghastly in death, the unpleasant features of a tall young man in a sailor's jersey. The face looked green and phosphorescent under the yellow lamp. Long face, closed eyes in hollow sockets, hooked heavy nose, sensual sardonic lips.

"Who is it?" shouted somebody from the quayside.

"There's somethin' else 'ere," yelled another hoarse voice. From the stone stairs a man with a long boat-hook drew-in a cloth cap, soaked in dirty water.

"Godelpus! Must 'a' bin drunk and fell in."

O'Brien was starting a long rigmarole for the benefit of the spectators.

"It was this way...."

He had grown melancholy and told his tale monotonously like a bedesman telling his rosary.

A doctor arrived in an old car which he parked in a side-street, shunting it here and there and tearing at his gears with loud rending sounds. With the surgeon came the Superintendent of Police, Hoggatt, whom he had picked-up on the way. They hurried to the quay, where the body was now being carried up the treacherous stone staircase with sounds of shuffling, groaning and panting.

One of the onlookers had, in his excitement, toppled into the basin and was hooked out dripping and sent home sneezing. His curses and groans died away in the distance.

The constable, who had been vigorously practicing artificial respiration on the body, was relieved by someone bringing from the dock office a petrol-driven machine which did the job.

The noise died down and the conversation was carried on in whispers.

"It all started like this...."

O'Brien was telling his tale to a reporter from the local paper. He was pointing solemnly over the water like a figure in a tapestry directing a battle of long ago.

The doctor pronounced life extinct. The noise of the busy resuscitator ceased and seemed to redouble the hush hanging over the spot.

In the outer harbour, the *John Anderson* blew one long and two short blasts on her siren. Thereupon, the Hardstone Head light went out. It was like the departing of a friendly companion, leaving everybody alone in the dark.

Then, from a side-street leading from the quay rose a wild, urgent wail.
“Help ...! Perlice ...! Help, help!! MURDER!!!”

II

MURDER IN PLEASANT STREET

TASTES seem to have altered considerably since someone gave Pleasant Street its name!

Twenty little houses—two up and two down—on the right hand side of it; twenty on the left. A narrow strip of garden in front of each of them and nothing growing in it but rank grass or dank moss.

The houses are in varying states of repair for, although they all belong to the same landlord, the vicar of St. Titus' Church, the reverend gentleman's agent has his own favourites among the tenants and spreads himself in some cases more than in others.

There is, however, a monotonous uniformity about the street. A stern matriarchal council reduces everybody to the same level in the way of exterior appearances. For example, the lintels and door-jambs are all stoned white and neatly frame the entrances. The doorsteps and window-sills, too, are of the same snowy colour. Nobody knows when, in the dark century and a half's existence of the property, the convention was started, or by whom, but the business of the convocation of women which governs the street is transacted during the early part of the day, which is devoted to this embellishing of entrances and thresholds. The case of anyone daring to break the unwritten rules of Pleasant Street comes for hearing before a score or more of matrons, arms extended over the doorways, like saints before a beatific vision, or else on their knees furbishing the steps like the anchorites who wore away solid stones by their genuflections.

The window-curtains of the street are uniformly drab and of plain net. Any fancy tenant daring to make her dwelling conspicuous and thus expose the shabbiness of the rest by an outstanding pattern, will soon get to know about it and suffer the tortures of sniffs, scornful looks, bodily rigidity and chattering behind her back until she returns to normal.

If anybody wants to put on a show, she had better remove her roost, bag and baggage, to a more progressive district.

At the head and tail of each row stands a shop. An off-licence and a small grocer's face each other at one end. At the other, a baker's in whose windows stand every morning rows of loaves and piles of pies, which have all vanished into the insides of the houses or their inhabitants in Pleasant Street before nightfall. The baker himself must suffer either from defective vision or faulty ovens, for his products are always overdone. As though he temporarily forgets them when they are out of sight and cooking and is only reminded of them by a smell of burning. Opposite the baker's is a fish-and-chip shop, the aroma of which bathes the whole street like incense when its owner, Mr. Menelaus, is frying.

Pleasant Street runs parallel to the quay of Werrymouth and is connected with it by side-streets running at right angles from each end. The names of these tributaries are Gas Street, the scene of the Werrymouth Corporation's long gone and historic experiments in a new illuminant, and Gladstone Street, founded by an admirer of William Ewart.

If the outsides of the Pleasant Street cottages are all alike, the insides and indwellers are not. Some have been there all their lives; others are here to-day and gone to-morrow. Some live orderly moral lives; others, like the woman at No. 32, who calls herself a widow and dresses like the Queen of Sheba, are no better than they should be. There are a lot of dark secrets hidden there. For instance, the pair posing as Mr. and Mrs. at No. 21 are not married, and if the truth were known about Mr. and Mrs. at No. 13, she, although possessing marriage-lines, isn't Mrs. at all, because her Mr. has committed bigamy; but nobody knows.

The man at No. 7 gets drunk three times a week and beats his wife. The pair of them turn upon anyone daring to interfere between them, although she screams the street down during the periods of flagellation. Now and then, internecine warfare breaks out in the street, blows have been known to be exchanged and the police called to restore peace. On one occasion, the man at No. 4, having come by a tumbledown piano as a legacy from his uncle, played it until his frenzied neighbour at No. 6 rushed in and crowned him with a beer bottle. No. 4 was in hospital for a fortnight after that and No. 6 went down for seven days. The sympathetic neighbours passed round the hat for both of them and gave their lonely wives four and threepence halfpenny each with which to keep their homes going whilst the mainstays were absent.

That was the nearest anybody got to murder in Pleasant Street until the night of October 23rd, 1943.

On that night everything was very quiet in the street. In fact, there was quite a benign atmosphere there, for Mr. Menelaus, who had been closed for a week owing to shortage of cooking-fat, had received a fresh lot that day and was frying like mad and filling the air with the unctuous aroma of his labours. Thin streaks of light escaped from badly blacked-out windows, revealing dark forms passing to and from the fried-fish shop like phantoms of the dead hovering round the libation poured out by some Ulysees or other. There was no other traffic than this, for the pubs had not yet turned out. From the upper room of the "Welcome Home," which backed on to the rear of No. 13, emerged the strains of "Lead Kindly Light..."

In the living-room of No. 27, two women were sitting at a table reading by the light of an oil lamp. The gas-fittings were so old that they impaired the supply and the vicar's agent would do nothing about it because the tenant was a Catholic, although she paid her rent on the nail.

One of the women was very old; in fact, eighty-one. She was reading a religious periodical with the help of a magnifying glass, for over her dim eyes cataracts were developing. There was an opaque dome-shade on the lamp, which diffused a soft white glow above and threw down a fierce circle of light over part of the table. The hands of the aged lady, lying in the full glare, were deformed with arthritis, but well kept. The face, illuminated by the gentler rays, showed a bright intelligence in spite of her years. Small features, sagging flesh on the cheeks and throat, and the skull beginning to show itself plainly, like an omen, through the tightened skin of the upper half of the head. The forehead was narrow, the nose small and stubborn, the dim, clouded eyes deep set. She was small and wiry, too, and remarkably active when about her business. Her name was Harriet Prank, a spinster, and she was worth £20,000, which her father had left her after a lifetime of cheeseparings and greed. She inherited, too, her father's parsimony and carried on the small house in which he had done his scratching and scraping over sixty years.

Miss Prank was having difficulty in seeing the print and stretched out her knotted hand to draw the lamp a bit nearer. There was a sharp intake of breath from the woman on the opposite side of the table as the moon of light travelled away from the book before her and left the page she was

reading in a state of eclipse. She reached to prevent the move. The hand revealed the character of its owner as it clutched under the full harsh glow. Soft and flabby with ragged nails and fat, coarse fingers. There was meanness in the very way she used it. The fingers wrapped themselves round the stem of the lamp like white slugs and encountered those of the old woman. For a second or two the pair of them tugged whilst the flame leapt, flickered and smoked, and then the elder released her hold with a protest.

“Really, Jane.... You forget yourself!”

Jane Prank was a heavy, sulky woman, with a round, stupid face, blue eyes in which simplicity and cunning seemed mixed, a broad common nose and a thick, porous skin. Her hair was grey and untidy; her figure floppy, large-breasted and ungainly; her complexion muddy. All of them characteristics of a woman too lazy to wash, dress and tidy herself properly. She dragged back the lamp to illuminate the page of a twopenny romance she was devouring and drew her tongue across her heavy lips in an unconsciously repulsive suggestion of appetite.

“Well ... I like that,” she said, thrusting her face aggressively towards her companion.

“You like *what*?”

The old woman’s mouth tightened and her clouded eyes seemed to wake up and flash with temper.

“You ... and your wantin’ all the lamp. Bad enough to ’ave to sit in with you on Saturday night when everybody else’s enjoying theirselves, without you expectin’ me to sit in the dark as well....”

“That will do, Jane.... You forget yourself....”

“Forget myself, do I? Me, your own flesh and blood as gave-up a good job to come and look after you ... sacrificin’ my time and chances ... and what do I get?”

“You know you only came to me for what you could get out of it, Jane, so you needn’t make a martyr of yourself....”

The old woman spoke in a slow, controlled, well-bred voice. The younger, spluttered in temper and her face twitched with rage.

“... In fact, Jane, I may as well tell you, I’m tired of this arrangement, too. I pay you quite well for what you do for me. You have a decent home here, plenty of liberty and I’ve promised that if you’re with me when I die,

I'll see that you're not forgotten. What could be fairer? Yet, you take it all in ill-grace, every service is grudged, your whole attitude one of grievance...."

"That's right ... go on! Think because you've been paying me a pound a week and keep you've bought me body and soul. But I won't stand it. Do you hear ...? I won't stand it. I'll go to-morrow, that's what I'll do. Me, that could be earning my five and six pounds a week on munitions ... me ... here I am, looking after an ungrateful old woman for twenty shillings. I won't stand it a minute longer...."

And with that, Jane burst into harsh sobs and lumbered from the room. Her heavy footsteps shook the house as she stormed upstairs.

The old woman sat perfectly still. The lamplight glowed on the well-polished good mahogany furniture. A coal fell from the grate, tinkled in the hearth and threw off a plume of acrid smoke.

Miss Prank slowly rose to remove the still burning brand. As she got on her feet she clutched the table, swayed and slowly sank in a heap beside her chair. There was not a sound in the house except the ticking of two clocks, a small busy alarum cheekily racing the grandfather in the corner. The red-eyed slut upstairs was lying on her bed, chewing her handkerchief to ribbons with rage.

Thus matters remained for five minutes or so, then the younger woman stamped down to recover her book. Seeing her relative—they were cousins—lying on the hearthrug, Jane paused, drew back, hissed sharply and hurried to her side.

The doctor had warned Miss Harriet to be careful about her heart. No shocks, or agitation. Take things easy.... As a rule, Jane took things so easily that the old woman lost patience and set about the housework herself. Now, the excitement of quarrelling had brought on one of her attacks. She soon got over them, as a rule. Jane, exerting herself, picked up the small, wiry body and lifted it on the couch. Then she thrust her ear close to Miss Prank's nose and listened, her own breathing coming in snorts. Her cousin was still alive, her chest rising and falling gently, her lips blue and her cheeks floury white.

That morning, Jane Prank had drunk up the last of the brandy they used for such emergencies.

She wasn't going to the quay for a drop from one of the pubs at that time of night if she could help it. In fact, she half hoped the old woman would pass out and leave her in peace. She was getting past standing much more of this quarrelling and so, apparently, was cousin Harriet. Jane was too big a coward to face her conscience for the rest of her life, however. She threw a shawl round her shoulders, gave a last glance at the patient to see that she was all right, and rushed out to obtain brandy and help from the house next door.

The offending coal had died-out leaving a choking smell in the room. The old woman lay there like a corpse laid-out and ready for the last offices. The two clocks ticked away.... Footsteps were heard approaching. The gate of No. 27 was opened, then the front door, which gave right on to the living-room.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo!" said a voice boisterously. As the lonely, still form on the couch came into view, the tone changed.... Hullllllo!"

The newcomer was a tall, slim man dressed in a sailor jersey, and blue trousers and jacket. He wore a cloth cap at a rakish angle and did not remove it as he entered. He was an unpleasant-looking young fellow, with a heavy hooked nose, sneering lips, long face and small, close-set eyes in hollow sockets. He had an air of cheeky familiarity and walked with a swagger. Hitching-up his belt and pants, the newcomer crossed to where the old lady lay and whistled between his teeth. There was a glass half-full of milk on the sideboard. This he picked-up as if to give her a drink. Then he put it down again. His eyes narrowed. With easy impudence, he opened a drawer in the sideboard thrust in his hand and drew out a purse. Still whistling softly he extracted the notes he found there and stuffed them in his pocket. He paused again.... Not a sound, but the ticking of clocks and distant foot-falls in the street.

"Anybody in?" he called.

No reply.

On the chair the old woman had been occupying earlier in the evening lay a heavy cushion. Swiftly the intruder seized this, deliberately and callously placed it over the face of Miss Harriet Prank, and pressed it down. Then, with quick, lithe steps he was at the door and there he turned, saluted his victim with a flick of his hand and was gone. He did not ask himself where Jane was or how the old lady had come to be lying unconscious as he

found her. All he knew was that the circumstances suited his purpose. He had always been an opportunist and took his luck as it came.... He was nearly at the quay before he remembered the glass of milk he had handled. He swung round to retrace his steps and put things right if he could. But Nemesis had caught up with him....

Had Jane Prank chosen No. 29, instead of No. 25 Pleasant Street in her search for help, matters would have been different. There was some delay at No. 25, because the lady of the house, Mrs. Dabchick, was expecting a baby and was too far gone to bustle around. In fact, her husband, who was ever in attendance, put a brake on such slow speeds as his wife essayed. Mr. Dabchick was subject to a type of premature couvade, as though the pangs of labour were upon *him* every time his wife made the slightest move or exertion.

Mrs. Dabchick produced a bottle of brandy as soon as she had heard Jane Prank's breathless tale of how her aunt had had another of her "do's." She expressed her intention of accompanying Jane and rendering what assistance she could, for she was an active-minded little woman who made light of the perils of her condition and yielded only to her husband's importunities out of pity for his nervous state.

"Cissie! You mustn't think of going out at this hour," cried Dabchick, agitated like a hen which, after mothering a brood of ducklings, sees them take to water for the first time. "*I'll* go with Miss Prank. You must stay quietly here and I'll be back as soon as I can...."

Dabchick was a weedy, little sandy-haired man with a small yellow outcrop of moustache on his upper lip and teeth like a rabbit. It is to be hoped that his expected firstborn, when it arrived, took after its mother.

"Of course I'm going, Wilfred...."

And so on. Meanwhile Miss Harriet Prank was suffocating on the couch next-door.

At last, they made a start, Dabchick lighting the way with a torch and pursuing an apprehensive and solicitous course in front of the procession.

They were met at the door by the most cantankerous-looking tabby cat Dabchick had ever seen in his life. He halted as though uncertain whether or not to sound the retreat. The two women, however, were too set on their main purpose to heed the animal, and walked past the man, who, recovering his composure, scuttered in after them like a rabbit to its burrow.

And there lay Miss Harriet, past the help of brandy or anything else.

“Who put *that* on her face,” said Mrs. Dabchick, snatching off the offending cushion and bending over the recumbent form of the old lady. Jane Prank stood by wringing her hands.

“I didn’t ... I didn’t. I just left her as she was...”

“Somebody must have been in, then.... Why, she’s not breathing. *She’s dead...*”

Mr. Dabchick became convulsed with apprehension again.

“Go home, Cissie.... You can’t do no good here.... Leave it to me.... You know you oughtn’t to ...”

“Shut up, Wilfred! Don’t you realise ...? Miss Prank’s dead. Somebody must have ...”

“You mean ... murder ...?”

“What else? She couldn’t ’ave done it herself.”

“I’d better get the police, Cissie ...”

“Yes. And a doctor. Though what good he’ll do ...” Jane Prank had, since the tragic discovery, stood silently wringing her hands and moving her lips, like a sinner reciting *mea culpa*. The words *murder* and *police* breaking on her ears seemed suddenly to release a great spasm of agitation. Grief, dreadful in its violence, shook her. Her cries startled the two Dabchicks who gazed helplessly at her. Then, with a wild shout, Jane Prank rushed into the middle of the street.

“Help ...! Perlice ...! Help, help!! MURDER!!!” she yelled.

Heedless of blackout regulations, the occupants of Pleasant Street streamed forth and light poured out of their houses like water released from a dam. Some were in their night clothes. Others, were half-intoxicated and fresh from their week-end Saturnalia. The man at No. 7, just beginning to beat-up his partner, paused, and making a hasty truce, hurried out with her, this time to be a spectator instead of an actor.

The woman at No. 32 appeared at her front door clad in a startling kimono and little else, whilst a distinguished visitor she had been entertaining clambered over the wall of her back-yard and was off hot-foot.

From the chip-shop of Mr. Menelaus teemed a motley crew of customers, shortly to be followed by Mr. Menelaus himself, fat, slow-moving, soaked to the very marrow of his bones in the grease of his craft and diffusing a strong, ineradicable aroma of stale fish-and-chips wherever

he went, so that as he approached, the crowd parted to avoid proximity with him, as before a leper....

When the police arrived they had to fight their way through a solid, vociferous human mass which filled Pleasant Street from end to end.

That sensible woman, Mrs. Dabchick, however, had wisely locked the door of No. 27 and pocketed the key. Otherwise, the scene of the crime would probably have resembled the aftermath of a cattle stampede.

III

IN THE SMALL HOURS

SUPERINTENDENT HOGGATT was sitting in his office at the police station talking to Dr. Swann, the surgeon. In the ante-room a number of important witnesses were awaiting questioning, but the two men were oblivious of all but the problem they were discussing.

The town hall clock struck twelve. All the tumult in the neighbourhood of the docks had died down. The wife-beater from Pleasant Street was sleeping in the cells below, for, stung to a new fury of sadism by the night's events, he had surpassed himself and had been gathered-up by the police, homeward-bound from the murder case, just as one who rises surfeited from a sumptuous feast, picks up and chews with apparent relish a morsel of bread left over from the first course.

"I'll do the two autopsies first thing in the morning," Swann was saying. "I'm too fagged to make an all-night job of it. But as far as I can see, the man was hit over the head with a sandbag or the like and drowned in the basin before he recovered consciousness. As for the old lady, we know her heart was bad. If the tale of the unpleasant woman who lived with her is true, she was left in a faint, and then someone came in and finished her off by smothering her. The post-mortem might show suffocation. I don't know.... A job to tell in cases where the heart's so bad."

The doctor was a tall, thin man with corvine features. Black hair round a tonsure of baldness, thick black eyebrows and a black complexion caused by a vigorous beard which shaving could not control. He kept rubbing his long nose as though it annoyed him.

"Well, Hoggatt, if there's nothing else, I'll be off. I'm dead tired ... called-out last night and had to operate right away...."

He yawned.

"Right-oh, doctor. Take this with you, too, will you, and let me know whether or not it's harmless ...?"

The Superintendent handed over a bottle containing what looked like milk.

“This what was in the glass on the sideboard?”

“Yes, doctor. Tastes a bit funny to my thinking.”

Hoggatt was a fresh-faced, upstanding young fellow with an open countenance and a straightforward manner. He was a local lad who had made good in distant parts and had returned with honour as head of the force in his own town. He was about the same height as the doctor, but heavier in build and his fairness was accentuated by the deep swarthinness of his companion.

The surgeon was tasting a drop of milk from the tip of his finger. He smacked his lips and rolled his tongue round his mouth.

“H’m. Now, what could it be? Strychnine? Or ... Wait a bit. Digitalis.... I’ll bet it’s that. Can’t be sure, though. Better wait till I’ve opened-up the old lady. That is, if she drank any of the milk. If you’re questioning that Prank woman you might ask her if the old woman’s doctor was giving her anything for her heart and if so, where the medicine is.... And also ask if any of the milk had been taken.”

“Very good, doctor....”

A young constable entered gingerly carrying the glass which had contained the milk and placed it on his chief’s desk.

“Any luck, Judson?”

“Yes, sir. Fingerprints of the deceased lady, as though she’d drunk from it, and those of Miss Jane Prank, who says she gave it to her for her supper. But there’s another lot, too. Look like a man’s prints, sir. He must have had a short forefinger, because there’s three and the thumb and then a sort of smear with no proper print....”

Dr. Swann standing listening with his hat on the back of his head and his eyes glazed from want of sleep, thrust forward his black jowl.

“What’s that? Three fingers? Just slip into the mortuary and get the prints of Sam Prank, the sailor lying on the first slab. He’s only three fingers and he’s related to the old lady. They must be his.... Well, I can’t wait to hear the results.... Good night.”

“Good night, doctor. Do as the doctor said, Judson, and let me know. And now you can bring in Miss Prank.... Jane, I mean, not the body.”

The constable made a whooping sound supposed to denote amusement, although he couldn’t see anything funny in the remark.

“And send Lester in, as well, to take some notes, please.”

“Very good, sir.”

Jane Prank was a dreadful sight. Weeping had puffed-up her normally heavy face and waiting for questioning by the police had frayed her nerves. Somebody had given her a cup of tea and the hot drink had brought her out in perspiration. Unwholesome and repulsive and ready at any moment to seek refuge in noisy weeping again.

“Sorry to keep you waiting so long, Miss Prank, but this has made us very busy. Believe me, I sympathise most deeply with you.”

The woman produced a soaking handkerchief and sobbed noisily into it without speaking.

“Sit down, Miss Prank. Would you like another cup of tea?”

“No.... I’ll be all right. I’m tired out an’ don’t know properly what I’m doin’.... Could we leave it till to-morrow?”

Hoggatt was a bit undecided what to do about Jane Prank. They only had her word for it that she hadn’t put the cushion over the victim’s face. She stood to benefit by the old lady’s death and might have engineered it. Also, the milk in the glass hadn’t been untainted. Had the woman before him doctored that? Circumstantial evidence was certainly against her, and a crafty unpleasant one of her type might not hesitate.... All the same, she looked too lazy to make a bolt for it. Probably, if she *had* done it, she’s sit quietly and cunningly and hope for the best.

“There’s just one or two questions I must ask you to-night and then you can go, Miss Prank. Don’t agitate yourself, now. It’s quite simple. I’m not trying to trip you up. Give me a straight answer to my queries and everything’ll be all right.”

Jane Prank sniffed, mopped her eyes and looked as though she didn’t know where she was. She wrung her ugly hands and rolled her head and eyes in what seemed to be paroxysms of agony and grief.

“So far, we’ve got your story as follows. Your aunt had a bad heart and was subject to fainting fits ... syncope, the doctors call them, I think. To-night you went upstairs and returned to find her in one of these attacks. You’d run out of brandy, which you use on such occasions, so went next door for a drop. When you returned your aunt was dead, but there was a cushion over her face which you state you didn’t put there, and which was on your aunt’s chair when you left her. That right?”

“Yes,” snuffled the woman.

“How long were you in next-door?”

“Ten minutes, I’d say. Couldn’t be sure though....”

“That was a long time and your aunt ill, wasn’t it?”

Jane Prank turned her weak, crafty eyes on the Superintendent as though trying to fathom some hidden meaning in the question.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she said in anger. “The Dabchicks took such a long time to make up their minds. One’d think nobody ever was goin’ to ’ave a baby besides them. Fussin’ around and arguin’ as to which should come in with me.... As if I wanted either of ’em. What I wanted was brandy....”

“I see. They were a bit fussy and took time making up their minds. Did you hear anybody enter next door whilst you were at the Dabchicks’...?”

“No. I ’eard people passin’, but had to close the door as I went in on account of the blackout....”

“Miss Prank was under the doctor for her heart?”

“Yes. Dr. Muschamp.”

“Was she taking medicine?”

“Yes. Why?”

Hoggatt ignored the question.

“Do you know what the medicine was?”

“No. They were tablets the doctor gave ’er. Mornin’ and night she’d to take ’em.”

“How? In water, or what?”

“She tuck them dry and washed them down with a drink.”

“Had she taken her tablet before she had the attack?”

“Yes....”

“There was a glass half-full of milk on the sideboard when we arrived. You remember, the one you had picked-up and were taking into the kitchen when I asked you to leave it with me?”

Another sly look from Jane Prank.

“Yes. I only tuck it away tidyin’-up, like. One would think I did it deliberate, to hear you talk....”

“Nothing of the kind, Miss Prank. I want to get this clear. Had your aunt drunk from that glass before she fainted?”

Jane licked her lips.

“Yes. I gave it to her full about ten minutes before she ’ad her ‘do.’ She took one of her tablets and washed it down with a drink. She always had a

glass o' milk just before she went to bed. To-night she left half of it to 'ave when she was ready for upstairs."

"Nobody else handled it?"

"No. Why?"

"Do you know Sam Prank?"

An expression of distaste and malevolence crossed Jane's face.

"Yes. He's a cousin of mine. Cousin Harriet was his aunt."

"Did he visit you at all to-night?"

"No. He's in town, I know, because his ship docked yesterday afternoon. It's a wonder he didn't call.... He was always round after cash from the old lady whenever he was in Werrymouth."

"To your knowledge, then, he's not called on your aunt ...?"

"Miss Prank was my *cousin*...."

"Your cousin, then.... He hadn't called on your cousin to your knowledge?"

"No. If he'd been I'd have seen 'im, because I've been in all day, except when I went for the brandy."

"Sam Prank was very friendly with your cousin?"

"Only for what he could get. She made no secret of it that he'd not been forgotten in 'er Will, though why, I don't know. He was always a spongin' good-for-nothin'."

"Would it surprise you to hear that his fingerprints were found on your cousin's milk glass?"

Jane Prank's eyes almost popped out of her head.

"What! Then he must 'a been in while I was in the Dabchicks'."

"So it would seem, wouldn't it?"

"It was 'im that put the cushion ...! Yes, it was! I wouldn't put it past 'im. Just in 'is line, that. Murder-an 'elpless old lady what couldn't 'elp herself.... I hope he swings for it. Thought 'e'd get his money by a short cut, did 'e?"

"Well, he won't get it now, Miss Prank. He's dead."

Jane Prank rose to her feet, rigid, horrified.

"Dead! Dead! Oh, dear Lord! Two of the family in one night! Somebody's out to wipe-out the lot of us. Whatever shall I do?"

Hoggatt thought it best to get rid of the woman before another scene developed.

“Where are you sleeping to-night, Miss Prank?”

“With a friend of mine from chapel.... I couldn’t sleep in Pleasant Street now.... Sam dead? How did he die?”

“He fell off the quay into the basin and was drowned.”

“Poor Sam.... He wasn’t all that bad. A jolly sort of chap....”

Jane was turning remorseful and Hoggatt thought he detected a note of hope, of pleasure in her tone. Probably one less in the family would mean more for the survivors in the share-out of Harriet Prank’s fortune.

“Tell Judson to see Miss Prank home to wherever she’s going,” ordered Hoggatt to the constable who had been quietly taking down the woman’s answers. “I’ll probably see you again to-morrow, Miss Prank, and I’ll get you to sign a statement. That’s all for now. Good night.”

Jane shambled off in better shape than when she arrived. Hoggatt opened the window to let in a little fresh air.

The Superintendent sat down again at his desk and gazed at the few notes he, too, had taken on the pad before him. He dotted a few i’s crossed a few t’s and then began to draw horses’ heads on his blotting-pad. He was an honest-to-goodness police-officer, very efficient in routine, punctillious in maintaining order in the town, a man who had started from the bottom rung of the ladder and been promoted for his integrity, smartness and bulldog qualities.

Had the case in which he had been suddenly plunged been the result of a quayside brawl, he’d have felt happy in putting everybody through the mill. But here was something more subtle. Family matters. A Will and a lot of people waiting for an old woman to die. One member of the family sandbagged and thrown in the dock to drown. Another poisoned, smothered, or died from natural causes, he didn’t know which.

In the south coast town in which Hoggatt had last served as an Inspector, he had encountered a murder case in which, after a week, the baffled local Chief Constable had decided to call-in Scotland Yard. The detective from London had shrugged his shoulders and eventually had to give it up, too. The trail had been allowed to cool for too long. There had been nothing left for Scotland Yard to fasten on to after a week of everybody else’s catch-as-catch-can.

Confined to a local seaside town one didn’t get much experience in dealing with murder....

Hoggatt ran his handkerchief round the inside of his collar. Then he took up the telephone and dialled Werrymouth 1523.

He told the Chief Constable what had happened and what he felt about it. They talked a lot, reached unanimity and the Superintendent at length hung-up, sighed softly to himself and dialled again.

“W^HITEHALL one-two, one-two.”

When Scotland Yard came through, they ended by telling Hoggatt that luckily one of their good men was just finishing a week's holiday at a nearby fishing village. They would instruct him to report first thing in the morning.

“Inspector Littlejohn's his name. The very man for you.”

Meanwhile, in the adjoining charge-room the sergeant on duty was taking statements from O'Brien and Creer.

The Irishman was holding the floor and making a great song and dance of it, too. He paced back and forth, like a restless artist in an effervescence of creation and dictating his inspiration to a secretary.

“Put down ... put down that me friend and oi was biddin' one another farewell after a convivial evenin', after a resumption, yes, a resumption of old friendship....”

“... was parting company after a night at the ‘Welcome Home,’” translated the sergeant, writing heavily.

O'Brien was so obsessed that he failed to observe the editing that was going on.

“Have ye got that? Then put down ... put down ... Suddenly, phwhat do we hear?”

The sergeant snorted as the Irishman paused dramatically. There was a silence as though all were tensely listening for the fatal sounds. A very efficient-looking clock with “J. Waldteufel, Maker, Werrymouth” boldly inscribed on its dial, ticked with a noise like a bouncing ping-pong ball.

“It's heavy footsteps we hear, approachin' the waterside. Thinks oi to meself....”

The sergeant could bear it no longer. With a loud explosive sound he flung his pencil down on the desk....

“Put a sock in it, O'Brien! Cut it out and get on with a proper straight tale. I'm writin' this down and want none o' your blarney and long

rigmaroles.”

“Oi refuse to testify then, if me words is to be transmogrified....”

“Aw, come on, Mike,” rumbled Creer, who, humbly taking a back seat and grunting confirmation now and then, was anxious to be getting to his lodging and bed. He was terrified of the widow who was his landlady. It was already well past midnight and like as not she’d already locked him out. She belonged to a religious sect which associated late hours with carnal sin....

The bridge-keeper, also present for testimony, had by this time fallen asleep awaiting his turn and was snoring like a pig in one corner.

Eventually, it was arranged that O’Brien should tell his story, the sergeant make a précis of it and read it over to the Irishman and his pal who would both sign it.

O’Brien protested against the syntax and style, but finally did as he was bid. Creer, whose powers of description at any time were scant, now, in the official presence, dried-up altogether and ended by confirming the statement in huge script, laboriously executed, with tongue hanging out and gripped between his teeth.

Then the mariners departed, O’Brien to climb into his lodgings through an open kitchen window; Creer to rouse his landlady, who, appearing in curling-papers and in a roaring temper, dispelled a very vague idea cherished by the Manxman that one day, when he could find words enough to broach the topic, he might marry her and settle down.

The bridge-keeper was annoyed when they shook him and he discovered that he wasn’t in his own bed.

He told the same tale as the two sailors, adding his own share of finding the body and interjecting yawns and protests at the tempo of the sergeant’s writing.

“Wot more can I say?” barked the man when they asked him at length if that was all. “Except that I bin deetained ’ere far too long by red-tape and slow writin’, and my wife and family’ll be scared out of their wits thinkin’ I’ve bin and gone and fallen off me own bridge.”

With that, he signed his name ponderously and flourished what looked like a lover’s knot beneath it. Then he shambled off home, where he was forced to finish his sleep on the couch downstairs, for his wife, attributing

his late return to intemperance and infidelity, had locked the door of the connubial bedroom and refused to listen to the truth.

IV

SUNDAY MORNING

LITTLEJOHN had been spending a week's holiday with an old crony, Inspector Playfair, who had retired on pension from the Yard and had gone to live a bachelor life at a spot on the coast three miles from Werrymouth. There, in a modernised fisherman's cottage, the superannuated detective spent his time gardening, sailing a small boat he had bought, and scouring the countryside for antiques at bargain prices with which he was converting his home into a museum.

On the last morning of his stay, Littlejohn was regretfully eating an early breakfast of dabs which they had caught on the previous day, when a youngster arrived from the nearby pub to call him to the 'phone. It was Scotland Yard instructing him to take over the Werrymouth murder case.

"A sailor there, apparently after murdering his aunt, was himself knocked senseless and thrown into the river and drowned. The local Superintendent is a young chap with his way to make and apparently wants us to help him do it right away. Being near, your might as well go down there and give them a hand. I'm sending Cromwell down, too. By the way, how's old Playfair ...?"

That from Chief Inspector Shell Drake.

Playfair was delighted.

"Better stay on here, old chap. There's a good 'bus service, weekdays, but they don't start till noon on Sundays. You can use my bike. It's in the tool-shed. It's a lovely run in this autumn weather along the coast road from here to Werrymouth."

So, it was agreed that Littlejohn should stay on with his old comrade until he could find out the lie of the land. He returned to the inn to telephone the news to his wife, who was assisting at the birth of a seventh child to her uberous sister who was married to a parson and lived at Rugby.

Littlejohn only cycled once into Werrymouth; the rest of the time he was happier on the 'bus. He had not been pedalling along for more than five minutes when he ran into the Mercury Cycling Club, out for a week-end's

run. Try as he would, he could not shake them off. The swarm was led by a hairy fogleman astride a tandem, the back seat of which was vacant, for its usual occupant was at home suckling a son and heir who was, as yet, too feeble to propel himself along with the rest. The leader had wooed, won and honeymooned awheel and was now mentally constructing a sort of gibbet-like contraption in which he shortly hoped to encase and transport the newcomer when his wife resumed her perch behind him.

Littlejohn made as if to pass; the hirsute drum-major haughtily gestured him behind. Whereupon, the rest of the hornets surrounded the Inspector and absorbed him in their body. As the motley crew sailed into Werrymouth, the constable on point-duty cocked an unfriendly eye at them, raised a huge paw and made the lot of them dismount. He had been strictly brought-up as a Plymouth Brother and thought it highly indecent for half-naked, dusty women, with their skins peeling from them, to be promiscuously mixing with sweaty, hairy-legged, wild-looking men. He always made a habit of stopping the phantasmagoria of rotating bare limbs whenever he could. Every time he called a halt to such goings-on, he felt he had put a spoke in Satan's wheel.

The bobby's eyes therefore almost shot out of his head when he saw Littlejohn, decently clad, emerge from the writhing cohort, park his bike at the door of the police station and briskly enter.

"Expect he's bin robbed, or somethin'.... Serve him right," he muttered and he waved-on the remainder, decently averting his eyes as the ladies of the troupe flung their legs about and shuffled themselves into their saddles again.

Littlejohn was soon comfortably settled in the office of Superintendent Hoggatt, visualising the happenings of the previous night from the tale the young officer was telling him. He took a liking to Hoggatt at once. There was no stiffness or false pride about the man. He was ready to learn fresh tricks from an old hand. He was plainly a bit out of his depth in the present case, and not afraid to admit it.

"It's obvious, Inspector Littlejohn, this business on the quay isn't the work of a mere footpad.... The hooligans of the town wouldn't go to the extent of murder. I think it was a deliberately premeditated crime, but who committed it's going to be a job."

“The old woman had remembered the murdered man in her Will, you say?”

“Yes. Her lawyer tells me Sam Prank, the second victim, stood to gain about five thousand pounds by her death. She was worth a tidy penny, I hear, although she lived very humbly. She left five thousand apiece to her cousin, Jane Prank, who kept house for her, and to another nephew, James Sprankling. The rest goes to the Holy Name Catholic Church, which Miss Harriet Prank attended.”

“Have you explored the Will angle, Hoggatt? I mean, have you checked-up where the other two more lucky members of the family were when this was going on ...?”

“Yes. As I told you, Jane was in next door getting help for her aunt...”

“But hasn’t it struck you that she might have smothered the old lady *before* she went for help?”

“But what about Sam Prank’s fingerprints on the milk glass?”

“They may have been there even before the milk was put in it. All Jane needed to do was, say, give Sam a drink of something in the glass and then when he’d fingered it and drunk up, preserve the prints by delicately handling the glass, fill it up with milk for her cousin’s supper after Sam had gone, and leave it handy for the police to work on...”

“She was sneaking off with the glass, though, when we arrived.”

“To attract your attention, maybe, and get you on to Sam’s prints.”

“Yes ... it might be that. But I don’t think so. Jane Prank doesn’t seem to have the wits to concoct such a clever scheme. Besides, what about the dope in the milk? Dr. Swann found that sufficient digitalis had been added to knock-out, if not kill, the old girl. But somebody did the job with the cushion before the drug could act.”

“Where had the drug come from; have you found out?”

“Yes. The old lady’s heart was bad and the doctor had prescribed digitalis. He gave her a box of twelve pills at a time. One pill was a dose and the doctor had issued strict instructions that the dose wasn’t to be exceeded, because Miss Prank’s heart wouldn’t stand more...”

“And someone *gave* her an overdose?”

“Yes. Three pills instead of one. Enough, Dr. Swann says, to cause severe palpitation and cardiac distress to a normal person, but enough to put ‘paid’ to anybody with a heart in the state of Miss Prank’s.”

“I see. And you think Jane did it?”

“I’m sure she did. I think she gave the overdose in the hope that the old lady would pass-out and the doctor would certify natural causes on account of her heart weakness. She intended to throw away the contents of the glass. Nothing easier in the world. Miss Harriett drank half the doped milk and, as was usual, left the rest until she was ready for bed. I’d say Jane intended her to die in bed.... More natural, like. The doctor had kept telling Harriet to have her bed downstairs. The nightly climb, he said, wasn’t good for her. But the old lady was stupid and wouldn’t. Jane perhaps would have said the staircase had been too much for her cousin at last.”

“You seem to have it all worked out, Hoggatt.”

“Yes. That part of it. I think while Jane was out, Sam Prank called, handled the glass, found his aunt helpless and, knowing of her Will, finished her off. Dr. Swann says death was from suffocation. This might have been due to heart trouble, of course, but the doctor says, all things considered, he’s sure the cushion did it. He called in a colleague from the county laboratory this morning and the specialist confirmed Swann’s findings.”

“Jane *may* have done it, Hoggatt. Don’t you think so?”

“Perhaps.... But who killed Sam? Not Jane. The Dabchicks give her an alibi there. You see, the time of Sam’s death is fixed, not only by the three men who saw the incident, but by the time the lighthouse was on. The three spectators say it was a man who did it. Wore a trilby hat and long overcoat.”

“What about the other relative ... Sprankling, I think you called him?”

“He’s got a cast-iron alibi, which it’ll be impossible to break. This year, he’s Worshipful Skipper of the Eccentric Order of Oddfishers. Last night they held a meeting from eight until ten-thirty and Sprankling was on the ‘bridge’ all the time.”

Littlejohn looked at his watch.

“It’s only eleven-thirty, Hoggatt. You must have been up early in the morning to gather so much useful information with the corpse hardly cold!”

Hoggatt flushed with pleasure.

“It’s Sunday, you see, Inspector. People are at home, instead of being scattered at places of business and Lord knows where. I found quite a few of them at breakfast....

“All the same, you’ve done a good job so far. I can see you and I are going to get on fine.”

The Superintendent seemed to glow all over!

“And who was this Sam Prank, Hoggatt?”

“A deck-hand on the *Bluebell*, a coaster registered at Werrymouth. She docked Friday afternoon. I’ve had a word with her skipper and Sam’s being on the quay at that hour puzzles him no end. Sam was fond of his beer and good company and it’s strange that he should have been wandering on his own along the docks instead of boozing in one of the pubs with his pals. That’s a line we’ll have to investigate further.”

“Well, Superintendent, what do you say to a walk to the scene of the crime. The harbour. I mean.”

“Of course, Inspector. Right away.”

The *John Anderson* was now past the swing-bridge and tied up in the inner harbour ready for the unloading of her cargo of cement. Side by side with her lay the *Bluebell*, Sam Prank’s ship. The *Mannin Veen* and the *Ynyslan*, moored end to end, were waiting, under steam, until their mates should be free to join them again after the inquest. Their skippers were together, drowning their disgust and commiserating with each other in the “Hardstone Arms” on the quay. Their two mates were surrounded by a curious crowd of dockside casuals in the bar of the “Welcome Home.”

O’Brien was telling a long tale and Creer was roaring monosyllabic confirmations. Both were half-drunk.

At the swing-bridge, the same custodian was on duty. He was nursing a grievance, for, although he had been kept long past his time last night, owing to the crime, the Harbour Master had insisted on his reporting for duty as usual. The custodian had no audience. Disgust had rendered him speechless and unsociable. He stood on his bridge, a picture of annoyance and protest, smoking his pipe and spitting viciously into the dark water beneath.

For twenty minutes or so, the two police officers wandered about the docks. Curious eyes followed their course. Most of the idle fishermen and stevedores were in their Sunday clothes of blue or black, with neckerchiefs knotted at the throat instead of collars.

When at length Littlejohn and Hoggatt reached the bridge, the keeper released his pent-up malice on them.

“... I work alternate weeks from six to two. Then from two to eleven others. This bein’ Sunday, it’s my first early shift for a new week. An’ ’e wouldn’t even let me off for two hours. An’ me ’avin’ done all I did to ’elp the law last night. Bloody shame, it is. Two o’clock when I got ’ome last night and the wife wouldn’t believe as I ’adn’t been up to somethin’ improper....”

They had to cut him short and inform him that it wasn’t within their province to tell him when to come and go, but that they sympathised with him. He ended by repeating verbally what he had testified in writing the previous night. He said he had nothing to add.

“You heard footsteps hurrying away after the second flash ... er ... Mr....?”

“Tebb’s the name, sir.”

Tebb was a stocky, pop-eyed little man with a walrus moustache and thick grey eyebrows. He removed his official peaked-cap—with B.W., the borough initials, in red on the front of it,—scratched his thick grey thatch as though stimulating his weary brain to greater activity, and replaced it with a forlorn and apologetic look.

“I think I did ’ear footsteps. Wouldn’t swear it. I’m so muddled through losin’ me sleep, that me brain won’t remember. I recollect dimly like, that somebody went off down Gas Street. That’s the first on the right there. Couldn’t be certain, though. When it dawned on me and the other chaps what was ’appenin’ after the first flash o’ light, we all started to run and drowned the noise, like, of anybody as might ’a’ bin runnin’ away.”

“See you at the inquest, Tebb,” said the Superintendent. And with that they left him.

They returned to the police station by way of Gas Street. This was a narrow, thronged part of the old town, where small squalid dwellings were clustered higgledy-piggledy on top of one another. Unsavoury smells of greasy cooking, bad air, sweat and fetid offal poured out of the little houses. Many of the householders were taking their ease and enjoying the fine morning standing at their doors. Dressed in the dark clothes which they held in reserve for Sundays, funerals and other family jublations, they festooned the street like sombre, ragged seaweed left by the outgoing tide.

“I suppose Sam Prank would come this way from the docks to his aunt’s house,” said Hoggatt. “That’s Pleasant Street, where Miss Prank lived, just

at the far end there.”

“Perhaps somebody saw him on his way,” answered Littlejohn. “Let’s try a pot-shot.”

A man who looked like a docker was standing in his shirt-sleeves and collarless at an open door, puffing a short clay pipe and periodically spitting into the middle of the street with great force and precision.

“Were you about between ten o’clock and half-past last night?” asked Littlejohn.

The man regarded the policemen impudently, for Hoggatt was in uniform, and with the characteristic hostility of his type for the force, grunted a surly reply.

“No business o’ yours where I wuz....”

Littlejohn eyed the man and sized him up. A bully, putting on a bold front.

“Come now. None of that. We’re here investigating the murder of Sam Prank. Did you know Sam Prank? Well, then you’re interested in helping us to clear it up, aren’t you?”

The man showed a little more interest, but seemed naturally either churlish by disposition or else to be suffering from arrested development. All brawn and no brain.

“Me and me wife wuz out till a quarter to eleven las’ night at the “Jolly Sailor,” but me eldest daughter wuz in. She’d the toothache, else she’d ’ave bin walkin’ the streets after the men, that’s where she’d ’a’ bin....”

The lounge turned his bullet head over his shoulder without otherwise moving.

“Margy!” he yelled from the corner of his mouth, after slowly removing his pipe and spitting forcibly and to a great distance by way of clearing his voice. “Margy! Come ’ere.”

A tall, bold-looking girl, almost like a lanky negress and with her hair standing in wiry curls all over her head, put in an appearance. One cheek was swollen and she pressed it with her hand to conceal it. Obviously a bad lot.

The stevedore jerked his head at Hoggatt and Littlejohn without a word and the swarthy wench turned her rolling dark eyes on them, still instinctively covering half her face with her fingers.

"I understand you were indoors between ten o'clock and ten-thirty last night, miss," began Littlejohn.

The girl looked apprehensively at the officers, scenting trouble.

"Yes. So what?"

"You didn't happen to go into the street and see any passers-by. I see there's a dimmed lamp opposite. I wondered if ..."

"No. Me tooth was so bad. I just sat by the fire to keep it warm...."

The loungers draped about the street were taking a lively interest in the proceedings and many of them began to approach the official group by slow degrees.

A small, stringy woman in the house right opposite had been bursting with curiosity throughout the interview. Not possessed of quite enough cheek to stare and openly listen-in, she had devised a number of strategic moves to keep herself informed. First, she shook a duster midway across the road; then a mop; and she followed these with a brush which needed a lot of manipulation to get it clean. Next, she brought out a can of hot water and poured it down a grid in front of her door. She then emerged with a bucket and cloth and began to remove imaginary bird-droppings from her window-sill. Emboldened by her anxiety to miss nothing, she finally appeared with another bucket and a shovel and started to spoon-up horse-dung from the middle of the street.

Littlejohn spotted this pantomime out of the corner of his eye, and purposely pitched his voice to reach the eaves-dropper, for he knew her kind.

"We were wondering if anybody saw Sam Prank hereabouts last night...."

He got a bite.

"I see 'im last night ... about ten o'clock it was," screamed the interloper, like one bidding at an auction. Thereupon, having established her right to do so, she triumphantly joined the group, smacking her lips and looking from one to another of the party like a dishevelled jackdaw.

"You did?" said Littlejohn.

"I did that. Just after ten o'clock as I was comin' home along the quay I see Sam Prank comin' out of Rosie Lee's shop there bein' a lamp right oppersite just bright enough to see 'is face by you bin up to no good I sez to myself knowin' both of 'em 'atching-out some evil I'll be bound...."

“Just a minute, just a minute,” gasped Littlejohn, clamping down on this torrent of verbiage and inwardly marvelling at the woman’s capacity, for she never halted for breath.

The woman gulped-in air and looked at him queerly. Her eyes were close-set over a hooked nose and a tight little mouth. She looked like an ant-eater.

“How did you know the time, Mrs....?”

“Mrs. Govannah’s the name.... Because I was just comin’ from the chip-shop with fish-and-chips for us suppers—went to Okell’s shop at the other end of the quay they use better fat than the Menelauses besides bein’ English and not Eyetalians as I’m sure the Menelauses is ... well, Mr. Okell ’as ‘is watch’ angin’ on an ’ook over the counter and I see it was ten o’clock by it and I waited for a few minutes for another batch of fryin’ to be ready and then I come ’ome....”

The woman gave in and halted for breath this time.

“Did you speak to Prank, Mrs. Govannah?”

“Why should I when he’s a good-for-nothing chap with easy ways as no woman is safe with....”

“Ha, ha, ha.... It’d ’ave to be as dark as ’ell for any man to make a mistake and try anythin’ on with you.... *Missis* Govannah, indeed! Nobody ain’t ever seen any *Mister* Govannah ... nor ever will....”

The gathering had been joined by another woman who emerged from the stuffy interior of the house behind the docker, and thus opened a verbal broadside on the poor ant-eater who, picking up her bucket and shovel, hastily fled to her own pitch.

The newcomer had apparently been in bed when the performance began but had risen hurriedly to be in at it. She was negroid like her daughter, but was fat and dropsical with dishevelled air and bloodshot eyes. She clung to a dirty wrapper which covered her sagging semi-nakedness. She glared venomously after Mrs. Govannah, who could now be seen watching operations from behind the lace curtains of her front window. Diplomatic relations had evidently been severed between the neighbours *vis à vis*.

“What’s *she* want? The mangey old poll-parrot! The bloomin’ nosey ruddy parker!” wheezed the fat woman. “Mindin’ everybody’s business but ’er own. The blasted peepin’ old Tom ...!”

“Sharrup!” said her husband, who had hitherto continued to prop-up his own door-frame without taking any interest in events. His wife must have been the one stimulus which stung him to coherent speech.

“I won’t shut-up. Can’t a woman see what’s goin’-on at her own door without bein’ swore at by a idle, ole, scroungin’...?”

“Sharrup, I said, didn’t I? Or I’ll slap yer on the kisser...”

Hoggatt and Littlejohn withdrew and left them to it.

Other neighbours were approaching and a meeting of the whole street seemed imminent.

“Nothing more we can do here,” said Littlejohn. “What about a look at the house in Pleasant Street where the old lady died, and then we’d better get back to the police station. My sergeant, Cromwell, is due just before one and I must be there to meet him. Incidentally, who’s Rosie Lee?”

As he spoke, the train from London was just arriving at Werrymouth Central, with Detective-Sergeant Cromwell aboard.

Cromwell was as usual, dressed in sober, dark raiment with a white wing collar showing over the top of his overcoat. He wore a bowler hat and looked like an itinerant preacher arriving to deputise in somebody’s pulpit. As the train stopped, he lugged out of the compartment a large and heavy suitcase, for, no matter how long his stay, he always came well prepared. He sniffed the air for sea-breezes, like a tea-taster sampling a brew, and, apparently finding it satisfactory, albeit his lugubrious face remained inscrutable, he picked-up his bag and made for the barrier.

“Carry yer bag, sir?”

A pale-faced, underfed whipper-snapper of a fellow eagerly pointed to the suitcase and touched his greasy cap. Cromwell passed the luggage to him and then grimly took it from him again as he saw how the man gave at the knees under the load.

“Shouldn’t try too much on an empty stomach.... It’s time you had your lunch,” said the detective and handing the casual half-a-crown, he picked up his bag with ease and hurried off, somewhat embarrassed by his own generosity.

“Godblessyer, sir, thankee, sir,” whined the little man and, as soon as his benefactor had vanished through the station exit, tore hell-for-leather to the nearest bar.

V

RETURN TO PLEASANT STREET

LIKE their neighbours in the adjacent Gas Street, many of the householders of Pleasant Street were taking the Sunday morning air propped against their door-frames, hanging over their garden gates or even seated on chairs on the pavement. As the detectives turned the corner and made for No. 27, a hush descended. Chatter died away and all eyes were turned on the officers like those of the chorus of a pantomime or opera eagerly focused on the conductor and waiting for the beat of his baton to set them going.

“Simon Lee, known locally as Rosie Lee, runs a mixed news agency and tobacco shop on the quayside. In view of what Mrs. Govannah said, we’d better call on him sometime to-day and hear what he’s got to say about Sam Prank’s visit last night. Lee’s a dark horse....” Hoggatt was saying as they reached their destination.

“I thought so,” he added, when, after he had knocked at the door of the murdered woman’s home, Jane Prank’s face was thrust enquiringly round the curtains. “I guessed she’d soon be back. Probably hunting among the old lady’s things seeing what she can spirit away before the executors get at ’em.”

He was wrong, however, for one of the executors was already there. James Sprankling had established himself on the hearthrug and was occupying the dead woman’s armchair. A small, portly man, with short fat legs, a red face and the fresh complexion of one who spends plenty of time in the open air, and sea air at that. He was the owner of two small fishing-vessels and made a comfortable living from them. He had a round head covered in short, silky hair, variegated by some strange disease and reminding one of a tabby cat.

Among his friends of the docks and Oddfishers, Sprankling was regarded as somewhat of an oracle and granted the honorary degree of “Captain.” He spoke very little and what was in truth the silence of ignorance, was mistaken as often as not, owing to the air with which it was maintained, for great profundity.

“I’m glad you’ve come,” said Jane Prank, letting-in the detectives and introducing Mr. Sprankling as her cousin James with an ill-grace, for she resented his squatting before she had found time to pry into the secrets of the dead. “I’ve been robbed!”

On the opposite side of the fireplace from Sprankling and almost invisible in the semi-darkness—for the blinds of the room were drawn in accordance with Pleasant Street funeral convention—sat another figure, that of a tall, angular woman. Jane Prank introduced her as Miss Toke, the friend from the chapel with whom she had spent the last night. As she rose from her perch and came into the lighter part of the room, Miss Toke revealed a spiteful, dark, foreboding face, heavy like a man’s, twitching nervously, and with an unsightly purple blemish down one cheek. With a squeak at the mention of police, Miss Toke fled upstairs and was not seen again.

Mr. Sprankling was less timid. He sat firm, enjoying his pipe, which he removed to greet the newcomers.

“Mornin’. Mornin’,” he said turning first to Hoggatt and then to Littlejohn. “The early bird catches the worm!”

With which cryptic utterance, he resumed his meditating and puffing in a cataleptic fashion. Whether he was calculating the wealth he would acquire, thanks to the efforts of the criminal the detectives were after, or whether his mind was just a blank, nobody could tell.

“Yes,” Jane Prank was saying. “Yesterday Cousin Harriet gave me ten pounds she owed me for wages ... and a job I’d had to get it, her bein’ so tight-fisted.... An’ I put it in my purse in that drawer. With last night’s carryings-on, I forgot about it until it was too late. When I came in this mornin’, I looked for it in me purse and it’d gone.”

“Gone, ’ad it? Fancy that,” rumbled Sprankling, popping out of his coma into the conversation and then back again.

“Sam Prank had ten one-pound notes in a bundle in his trousers’ pocket when his body was recovered. That’s probably where your money went, Miss Prank....”

“Can I ’ave it back?”

“In due course,” snapped Hoggatt impatiently. “I just want a word or two with you, Miss Prank, concerning the habits of Miss Harriet. Now, it looks very much as though Sam called here for money. Was your cousin in the habit of lending him sums?”

“Yes. Whenever ‘is ship docked, he was ‘ere, cadgin’ and soft-soapin’ the old lady. Often enough I’ve told ‘er that all he wanted was ‘er money, but she usedter lose her temper at me....”

Sprankling awoke from his torper again and reared himself in the chair.

“‘ow much did ‘e ged oud of ‘er?” he rumbled, mangling his words in a strange fashion of his own, due, apparently to a reluctance to open his mouth properly.

“‘ow should I know? She never told *me* wot she give ‘em. Kep’ her own counsel.... A deep ‘un was cousin ‘arriet.”

“Ztrange goin’s-on there’ve bin ‘ere. Me, ‘er eggzecutor, knowed nothin’. An’ now she’s dead, gan’t gedter know nothin now, eether. Lawyer sez he ain’t goin’ ter disguss business on Zundays. Bud I’ll see me own lawyer termorrer.... I’ll zhow ‘im as I got me rights. Eggzecutor, ain’t I?”

“Captain” Sprankling had evidently been trying to rush his co-executor, the dead woman’s lawyer, and had suffered a rebuff which made him unusually talkative.

“How was the money left, Mr. Sprankling?” asked Littlejohn, for, though he knew perfectly well what the Will contained, did not care to disclose the fact to the injured trustee.

“Ah.... Thad ‘ud be tellin’...!” rumbled Sprankling enigmatically and subsiding in his chair again as though to take counsel with himself.

“Might as well tell yer,” he said at length. “Zeein’ you bolice are on the side o’ the fambly, like. Legacies left to me and Jane there. Not statin’ no figgers as they ain’t nezessary. But the rest, avter that, is left to the church ... the catherlic church....”

The “Captain” opened his mouth like a landed fish gasping for air, and emitted a cloud of smoke.

“A sgandal.... That’s wot it is. A sgandal! Us a protestant fambly for ‘undreds and ‘undreds o’ years, and then all our money left to gatherlic church....”

It was taking the slow-witted “skipper” so long to get his tale and his grievances off his chest that Littlejohn turned to Jane Prank for speedier results.

“What’s all this about, Miss Prank?”

“It’s as ‘e sez. Cousin ‘arriet’s father ‘ad a long illness and the pastor of the church our family belonged to ... the Congregation of Burnin’ Bushers

... never called. Felt 'e wasn't welcome, 'e said. Well, one of the priests from the 'oly Name Church as usedter call next door, 'eard about Uncle Ezra, like, and started comin' to sit and talk with 'im. A nose for money, 'ad that priest, I allus sez ..."

"Never sboke a truer word, Jane..." thundered Sprankling, emitting smoke like a naval gun firing a broadside.

"... An' cousin 'arriet' took a fancy to that priest. Let 'im bury uncle Ezra, she did. An' us a big dissentin' family! Scandalous, we all called it. But she was that stupid...."

"Sgandalous is the word, Jane.... Sgandalous it was."

"Then, spite of what we all said, cousin 'arriet started to go to the 'oly Name reglar.... Nothin' we could do or say would change 'er mind...."

"Sgandalous it was and sgandalous *is*!"

"So now, the church gets the money instead of the family," hissed Jane through her closed teeth.

"You've nod done so badly, Jane. Nod so badly...." grunted Sprankling.

"Wot you talkin' abaht, you old ...?"

"Now, now, Jane. Not in front of strangers.... No dizhgracin' the fambly beefore outsiders...."

"Well, shut-up then...."

"Me last word to you police is, if you wants to know all about the brivate life of Harriet Prank, ask the priest. Ask the priest, I says. She never told the fambly nothin'. Thas all I got to say to yer...."

And with that "Captain" Sprankling withdrew into himself like a tortoise in its shell and commenced afresh his smoking and private ruminating.

Jane Prank was manifestly uncomfortable in the presence of the police. Littlejohn decided to try one more shot before they left.

"I understand that Miss Harriet took her own medicine.... I mean, *you* didn't give her the pills to take."

"That's right."

"Where did she keep them?"

"In the sideboard drawer there."

"According to medical findings, she took three pills instead of the usual one. Have you anything to say to that, Miss Prank?"

“No. Why should I? What you gettin’ at? I *said* she took her own medicine and I *meant* she took it...”

The woman was getting hot and excited.

“Could Miss Harriet see very well?”

“No. She ’ad cataracts comin’ over her eyes.”

“Funny she didn’t let you give her the pill then.”

“She was stupid. Wouldn’t admit when she was beat. She was that sort.”

“Did you get on well with your cousin?”

“Yes. Why?”

“She seems to have got on your nerves a bit.”

“You oughter try livin’ with an old woman with one foot in the grave and allus complainin’ and never grateful for all you done for ’er. *And* that unconsiderate as to want to keep me indoors all the time in case she wanted anythin’. Money or no money, I told ’er, I’m ’avin’ my time off and out with me friends, so put that in yer pipe and smoke it. I told ’er that straight, I did. She ’adn’t bought me body and soul for a measly pound a week and I let ’er know it, too.”

“Well, we’ll be going now, Miss Prank, and leave you to your business. You’ll be at the inquest, to-morrow...”

“Yes. I’ve ’ad a paper to attend. Though what good *I’ll* be ...”

“Good morning.”

Hoggatt and Littlejohn were glad to get in the open air again after the gloom and fug of the darkened house.

The inhabitants of Pleasant Street had gravitated towards the door of No. 27 and stood in a ragged semicircle round it, as though hoping to hear through the timber all that was going on inside. At the sight of the officers, they began to disperse languidly, like a Verdi chorus making a nonchalant processional entrance preceeding the arrival of the principal singers.

“Time for some lunch,” said Hoggatt. “We’d better get back to the station.”

“In the heat of the chase, I’d forgotten my faithful Cromwell, too,” added Littlejohn. “He’ll wonder where I’ve got to. I think a visit to Mr. Rosie Lee won’t come amiss this afternoon. And I guess I’ll take the oracular Sprankling’s advice, as well, at an early opportunity. Ask the priests, he said, didn’t he?”

They got little farther that day, however, for Rosie Lee had packed-up and gone off somewhere. His shop was closed and shuttered when Littlejohn and Cromwell called after lunch. The priests of the Holy Name, too, were too occupied with their Sunday duties to be approached about crime. It seemed indecent to tear them from their sacred offices and bring them back to earth and a sordid murder case.

So, the two Scotland Yard men returned to Inspector Playfair's cottage, where a bed was arranged for Cromwell in an attic room into which, in spite of its low ceiling, the lugubrious sergeant managed to fold himself without too much strain. Having made arrangements for the new arrival's bed and board, the party adjourned to the sea in Playfair's boat. They caught enough fish for the morrow's breakfast and Cromwell, who hooked twice as many as his two friends together, was seen to smile one of his rare smiles as they brought their catch ashore.

Four days later, Mrs. Cromwell evacuated from their home in Shepherd Market to her old place near Truro, for a young Cromwell was expected in course of time, received a parcel of stinking fish, with her husband's love. She did not tell him when next she wrote, that the results of his labours had decomposed en route, thanks to a delay in the post. He had enough on his mind without that!

VI

INQUEST

WHEN the Werrymouth lodge of the Order of Ancient Mariners amalgamated with their rivals, the Eccentric Order of Oddfishers and moved into the Oddfishers' Hall, their imposing and vacant headquarters were purchased by the County Council which was hunting around for a Coroner's Courthouse.

In this building, therefore, Mr. Titus Jackson, County Coroner, held the inquests on Sam and Harriet Prank.

Mr. Jackson was a small man with a smooth, pink face, a bald head shaped like a melon and large, even false teeth which made him resemble a ventriloquist's dummy. On the rostrum on which he was perched on that eventful Monday morning, the Coroner's chair was elevated by a small hidden platform to make him look taller and to raise him to a respectable level above his desk. Otherwise, he would have looked to be hanging on to it by his chin. As it was, his short legs dangled a good six inches from the floor.

Above the Coroner's dais, a single eye, wide-open and all-seeing, cunningly carved in wood, glared down on the body of the court. One of the insignia of the departed Ancient Mariners which had not been removed. It served to remind those present that from Mr. Titus Jackson nothing could be hid, as from God, whose eye the Ancient Mariners used in their ritual to terrify new members as they were sworn-in.

Mr. Jackson was very excited at the prospect of two murder enquiries. Here was a chance to rehabilitate himself on the upper rungs of the ladder of social life in Werrymouth, in which, since his second marriage a year or so ago, to a lady of inferior rank, Mr. Jackson and his partner had been mere also-rans. Knowing the craven nature of the female Judases who fluttered round Lady Bromiloe, the leader of the town's high society, the new Mrs. Jackson realised that masterly handling of the enquiry would put Titus in the headlines side by side with Hitler—locally at least—and prove to the meet-you-with-a-smile, stab-you-in-the-back women whose community

Mrs. Jackson was, for some strange reason, itching to join, that her husband was no nonentity, but a power to be reckoned with.

This tortuous piece of diplomacy having been tearfully but carefully put to Titus on the way home from church the previous evening after Mrs. Jackson had discovered that her name had been omitted from Lady Bromiloe's "Bring-and-Buy" Committee, whatever that might be, he realised that it was up to him. He and his wife must be elevated at once from the social limbo of Werrymouth, where they reposed at present like anonymous players in a cricket match found at the tail of the team and listed "A. N. Other."

The Coroner thrashed his desk with his wooden mallet and cast a perforating stare round the hall.

The courthouse was crowded, for nothing like this had occurred in Werrymouth before. Work on the docks had almost been suspended, a few late holidaymakers had rolled up for a free show, housewives had postponed washing-day until Tuesday and the crews of several ships then in port had arrived to see their mates, O'Brien and Creer, top of the bill, put on their act.

Mr. Jackson surveyed his motley audience over pince-nez which bit so viciously into the bridge of his nose, shaped like an old-fashioned milestone, that the red weals were visible from the very back of the room.

The atmosphere was stifling and smelled of disinfectant, moth-balls, stale tobacco and escaping gas.

The building was filled to capacity. Seating consisted of long, hard benches, unmercifully punishing to the anatomy. These were all jammed with a sweating throng, but now and then another optimist would halt at one of them, murmur "room for one more," and insinuate himself on the end. Whereat, the whole content of the bench would move along, forcing-off the unfortunate at the other end and driving him to a seat in the damp window-sills. This sort of pushing and pulling went on until Mr. Jackson ordered the closing of the doors. It only needed a House Full sign to complete the illusion.

The only comfortable one in the audience was Mr. Menelaus whose dreadful personal aroma kept intruders at bay and permitted him to sit in peace like an astrologer in his pentacle.

The hour of sitting was earlier than usual. A deputation of master mariners had—on Sunday of all days!—broken upon the Coroner's afternoon snooze with a request to get it all over and done with before the eleven o'clock high-tide. In these days of shipping shortage it was the least Jackson could do to release O'Brien and Creer and let the *Ynyslan* and the *Mannin Veen* get under way on Monday morning.

At nine-thirty sharp, therefore, Mr. Jackson hammered his desk for silence.

Sam Prank, deceased came first. Not because he had a prior claim, but because the witnesses in his case were champing at the bit to be off.

Formal identification of the remains was given by "Captain" Sprankling, who adjudicated soberly, like the judge at a dog-show. His reputation for being a wiseacre increased among his following, for his stupidity was mistaken for oracular profundity.

The police-surgeon, Dr. Swann, gave his evidence coldly and methodically. He looked like a medical Mephistopheles, dark, tall, slim and sardonic.

"... Yes. In simple language, he was first rendered unconscious by a blow on the head from a blunt instrument—a stick, a piece of lead or rubber tubing, or even a spanner, I would say. Then, whilst unconscious, he was flung in the dock, where he drowned, unable to help himself...."

There were cries of *Shame!* and groans of horror. A woman fainted and was carried out. The audience wanted plenty of sensation. They moaned sympathetically as the surgeon told his tale. He left the box all too soon. Some of the listeners would have given him an encore had it been possible.

Dr. Wolfgang Amadeus Smith, county pathologist, confirmed Dr. Swann's statement.

Constable 89, John William Fasbon, entered the box next and gave his evidence in a dull sing-song, refreshing himself from time to time by referring to his notebook. This he did with a proper professional gesture, using both his hands and holding his copy low and well away from his mouth, for in his spare time he was a bass singer.

The jury, which included three women, with the local stationmaster as foreman, were dressed in their best and on their best behaviour, as though their foreman were taking them on an excursion in some of his rolling-stock and had promised them a new shilling each if they behaved. Every time a

train whistle sounded from the distant Werrymouth (Town) Station, the stationmaster winced as though suspecting that schedules were going to pot in his forced absence. He kept taking out a huge watch and consulting it every time he heard a train on the move.

“... At ten-twenty-seven on the night of Saturday last I was on duty patrolling in the vicinity of the Old Quay, when I was informed that someone had fallen h’in the dock,” intoned P.C. 89, in his best “Trumpeter what are you sounding now?” style. “I hurried ... body ’ad been recovered ... assisted in bringing it to quayside ... unsuccessfully tried artificial respiration ... resuscitator ... arrival of doctor ... pronounced life to be h’extinct.”

No. 89 halted and, only just in time, prevented himself from bowing in anticipation of a storm of applause.

“Any questions?” This from Mr. Jackson to the jury, stretching his neck and turning to them like a talking-doll.

“Next witness.”

“Call Michael Ambrose O’Flaherty O’Brien...”

The intermediate names brought a titter and some jovial mumblings from the nautical section of the crowd, who carefully noted them in their minds for future ridicule.

O’Brien mounted the stand with a vigorous, swaggering air. He looked quite at home and took the oath solemnly.

“... and nothing but the truth, so ... help ... me ... God,” and then he added, “St. Michael and all the blessed angels,” ending by kissing the Book loudly and with a flourish.

“No need for you to embellish the oath, O’Brien,” said Mr. Jackson, glaring and taking the measure of the witness. “This is a serious business, not a comic turn. Curb your exuberance.”

“Very good, yer Lordship.”

“Mr. Coroner is a sufficient honour to pay me. Now to business.”

O’Brien was a masher and no mistake.

His cheeky, wedge-like face shone and beamed. He had his best suit on, which between trips and solemn occasions calling for its use, he stored in the pawnshop. Round his neck was knotted a kerchief of many colours. A pair of brown boots, also a redeemed pledge, although invisible in the witness-box, finished off the display of finery.

“Name.”

“Michael Ambrosius O’Flaherty O’Brien. Born Dublin, March 21st, 1893, mate of the *Ynyslan* of Cardiff, at present docked in Werrymouth harbour.”

“Tell the court what happened on the night of Saturday last ... as succinctly as you can, please.”

“Beg pardon....”

“Briefly....”

The Irishman lubricated his lips by running his tongue along them and then rubbing them against each other.

“On the noight of Saturday last, my friend Creer and me was leavin’ the “Welcome Home” where we’d been spendin’ the evenin’ quiet and sober like. The night was dark and as we was leavin’ the place I sez to Creer ...”

“We don’t want to know what you said to Creer. What did you see at the time of the crime?”

“Oi’m comin’ to that if your Lordship will let me. As Oi was saying, I sez to Creer ...”

The nautical portion of the audience tittered and chirped and Mr. Jackson thrashed his desk with his wooden hammer.

“Silence! Now, you, O’Brien, just answer my questions if you want to sail with the *Ynyslan* to-day.”

“That he does,” roared the Captain of that vessel, who was in the body of the court “And you, O’Brien, just answer his worship civil and proper, or I’ll knock the teeth down yer throat.”

“I can manage affairs in my own court, thank you,” tartly ejaculated the coroner. “Now, witness ...”

Eventually they got a proper tale out of him which merely amounted to an ornamented repetition of the statement O’Brien had already given.

“... the second flash showed dirty work indade. By we saw one dark shape stroike the other a foul blow and drag him to the water side. There was a splash. When the next beam came, what did we see? Nothin’ at all. The villain had gone. Bad cess to him! So to attack a helpless man in the noight.”

There was a loud and sustained murmur of sympathy from the body of the hall. Several of the devout crossed themselves. The coroner again smote

his desk with his hammer like a frenzied auctioneer knocking down a lot to a lucky bidder.

“Thank you. Stand down, O’Brien...”

The Irishman was in the limelight, however, and was ready to go on with details concerning the recovery of the corpse and with medical particulars concerning the state it was in when landed.

“STAND DOWN,” yelled Mr. Jackson, kicking his unseen and dangling legs to and fro in a tantrum.

O’Brien was led off by a policeman and parked where he could do no further harm.

Edward Creer, huge, awkward, sweating, lumbered into the box.

He took the oath and gave details of his age and birthplace. These he immediately followed by a statement in which his Irish buddy seemed to have schooled him.

“... and I hereby confirm all the testimony given by my friend and one-time shipmate, Michael Ambrosius O’Brien...”

“Wait a minute, Creer ...” yelled Mr. Jackson.

Creer stood like a patient ox awaiting slaughter. He was an excellent mariner—none better—but publicity was purgatory to him. His laboured breathing could be heard all over the court. He had fortified himself with courage before his ordeal and blew a blast of alcohol in the face of the constable who handed him the card from which to read the oath.

Mr. Jackson led Creer through his business, like a drover dragging a huge bull to market by a ring in his nose.

“... I ’eard the footsteps, saw the flash, an’ heard the splash,” admitted the Manxman.

“Nothing to add to O’Brien’s testimony?”

“I said so at the beginning, yer Lordship.”

“How many more times must I tell you ...? Stand down.”

“Hoi!” rumbled Creer in a stage whisper to the nearby bobby whose neck, face and bald head grew livid by degrees as a hoarse consultation went on.

Meanwhile, in the well of the court, the masters of the *Ynyslan* and the *Mannin Veen* rose noisily like men with a set purpose and rolled to the door, after saying goodbye to all their pals within hailing distance.

As for Mr. Jackson, he sat beneath the all-seeing eye like the operator of a marionette show who has more dolls on his hands than he can manage to manipulate. He glared at the embarrassed constable in tête-à-tête with Creer; he tried to keep his dignity before his jury; and he ferociously watched the disorder caused by the withdrawal of the two captains. Then he battered his desk again with renewed fury with his mallet.

The effect was electric. Creer ceased his loud whispering and hung suspended over the edge of his pen. The constable's mouth fell open. The two master mariners halted in the aisle like ships suddenly becalmed. All eyes focussed themselves on the bellicose little coroner, as though drawn by some magic formula or else by the object like an optician's advertisement above his head.

"What is all this? Witness, stand down! If you require information, I'm the one to consult. Have you anything to say?"

"Can me and O'Brien join our ships and set sail, yer honour?"

"Under the circumstances, yes. It is unusual for such a release to take place before the verdict, but I take it the jury will concur if I agree, in view of the present shipping situation."

The jury nodded unanimously and the station-master said, "yes" loud enough for the lot of them.

"Thank you kindly, gentlemen—and yer honour," bellowed the skipper of the *Mannin Veen*.

"Hear, hear," boomed his companion of the *Ynyslan*.

There were rumblings of approval from the rest of the nautical section of the audience.

The four sailors returned to the "Welcome Home" to re-inforce themselves, and then embarked.

The congregation of the Coroner's Court heard the two ships blowing their sirens at the swing-bridge and nodded to each other approvingly. A wave of general good will seemed to wash over everyone except the coroner and the holidaymaking portion of the throng.

"It was then that it dawned on me that things wasn't as they oughter be ..." the bridge-keeper, now in the witness-box was saying. Without his official cap he looked an insignificant nonentity. He was dressed in his best, with highly polished shoes which curled-up queerly at the toes, and his bowler hat was in his hand.

“And then?”

“I took a boat and put-off ... pokin’ around with a boathook until I found ’im.”

And so on. All the details of the previous Saturday evening’s adventure. The bulk of the audience were getting bored. They shuffled, yawned, kicked their feet and finally were seized with an epidemic of coughing, which one member took-up as another left-off, like a game at a Christmas party. Mr. Jackson had to threaten to clear the court a time or two.

The inquest of Sam Prank terminated dismally.

Mr. Jackson summed-up pompously. As if there was anything to sum-up for! The jury jumped like one man at his suggestion. Inquest adjourned; repeat performance later.

Then followed Miss Harriet Prank’s enquiry. That was more sensational.

Jane Prank identified the corpse and “Captain” Sprankling, with the great approval of the many Oddfishers there, gave an encore.

The two doctors created a great sensation. Miss Prank was first knocked-out by an overdose of digitalis. And then suffocated whilst unconscious and alone.

Mr. Jackson then began to put Jane Prank through the hoop.

Why was she so long away? Why, when the deceased suffered so badly from cataracts, had she allowed her to handle her own dangerous drugs? Did she not think she had been guilty of gross carelessness? Now, as to the cushion; where was it when she left the deceased? And so on.

Heavy, stupid, with glazed eyes and a half-witted expression on her features, Jane Prank explained her cousin’s stupidity. Harriet Prank considered that she could well look after herself. She was of an independent and irritable disposition and soon got annoyed at any suggestion that her faculties were on the wane.

The Coroner could make no impression on the witness. He told her at length to stand down. She left behind her an unpleasant feeling that somehow she had not told all she knew. She had outwitted the Coroner by a show of stupidity.

Mrs. Dabchick, proudly carrying the next generation before her, testified concerning events on the night of the murder. Her husband danced anxious attendance upon her, as though expecting his progeny to be born in

the witness-box, and afterwards was almost too overcome with anxiety to corroborate what his wife had stated.

Then, like a conjurer producing a rabbit from a hat, Mr. Jackson called an unexpected witness.

Canon Conant, priest of the Holy Name, entered the box and was sworn. A tall, heavy man with a pink face, close-cropped white hair and loose hanging cheeks. A diabetic. His large, flabby hands trembled as he took the Book for the oath. A good-living man, well-beloved by his large flock and respected by outsiders. He was fighting physical infirmity with courage.

This morning the Canon was not at his best. Over the week-end he had received one shock on top of another. These had put a lot of sugar in his system. He felt torpid and leaden-footed.

"I understand that you have come forward to make a voluntary statement, Canon Conant, concerning something the deceased woman recently told you. Is that so?" said Mr. Jackson.

The Coroner tried to be coldly formal towards this witness to prove that the priest's vast influence did not extend to *his* court. But somehow, he couldn't quite pull it off. It was a matter of personality. The Canon had it every time, in spite of his bad health. Try as he would, Mr. Jackson found it impossible to forget that his legs were dangling almost a foot from the ground and that he had to be buttressed to make him appear adult at his desk. Mr. Jackson's attitude towards the witness ended in becoming one of furtive humility.

The Coroner's voice sounded to the priest to come from very far away.

"That is so, Mr. Coroner."

"Please tell the court what Harriet Prank said to you."

"She told me that she feared for her life."

A collective intake of breath sounded in the well of the court, a united and expectant hiss, followed by shuffling sounds as the audience voluptuously writhed in expectation of further horror. Then a hush.

"When was this?"

Mr. Jackson was peering, open-mouthed over his glasses at the witness.

"After service on Wednesday evening. She was very agitated."

"Did she give you any idea from which direction she expected an attempt on her life?"

The priest hesitated. He had already told his story to the police, who had passed it on to the Coroner, with a request that it be held over until the resumption of what certainly would be an adjourned enquiry. But Mr. Jackson had insisted on the witness being called this time, promising to be discreet in his questions and merely to take enough testimony to prove plainly the need for a deferment.

Hoggatt, sitting with Littlejohn and Cromwell in front of the court, half rose as though to stop Mr. Jackson from making an ass of himself, but too late.

The Coroner removed his pince-nez, pulled his nose and then put them on again.

The Canon hesitated. The Coroner's voice seemed to come from very far away again, and now he could not see Mr. Jackson properly. All he could make out was the high lights shining on his bald head and eye-glasses.

"Come, come, sir. You are on oath, remember."

Mr. Jackson realised as soon as he had said the words that he had gone too far.

The priest fixed him with a steady eye. For a minute their glances held each other. Then the Coroner's fell on his notes. He did not know that the Canon was now seeing only fluid blackness, almost like ink....

"Well, sir?"

"I cannot disclose any more that I know...."

"You *what!*"

"I cannot ..."

Littlejohn turned his calm blue eyes on the priest. He knew what was coming. The Coroner had landed himself in a jam.

"Cannot disclose ... revealed to me in Confession ... my lips therefore sealed...."

And with that Canon Conant sank slowly down and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

The inquest was adjourned *sine die*. Some of the frustrated jury said that Jackson had behaved like a cad in keeping the priest standing when he was obviously in such poor shape.

The audience had certainly had a bellyful of sensation and as they watched the ambulance taking away Canon Conant their sentiments

concerning the Coroner were unanimous. One section, the sporting element, wanted to wait for him at his private exit and treat him as they treated unpopular referees down at the Werrymouth United football ground. The other lot got busy enquiring from one another the procedure for impeaching and sacking a Coroner.

However, kindly nature took matters in hand and by removing malice from the situation in her own astonishing fashion, saved Mr. Jackson from what might, to say the least of it, have been a rough house. A seagull accurately placed a large dropping on the crown of the Coroner's hat as he left the courthouse, putting him completely out of countenance and turning the wrath of the waiting crowd into roaring hilarity. Such an unexpected anointing is regarded as a good omen by fisherfolk, but Mr. Jackson didn't agree.

That evening, there was great activity among the Bromiloe sycophants, who were so triumphant at the downfall of the Jacksons, widely trumpeted round the town, that, after meeting to arrange for comforts for the Merchant Navy, they drove their cars to and fro blackguarding Mrs. Jackson in every direction and wasting the precious petrol intrepidly brought at terrible risk by the very sailors they were patronising.

VII

MR. ROSIE LEE

AFTER the inquest Littlejohn and Cromwell parted.

The Inspector was anxious to interview the newsagent on whom Sam Prank had called just before his death. Meanwhile, he sent his Sergeant to pick-up any news he could from the crew of the murdered man's ship, *The Bluebell*, before she sailed on the next tide.

Lee's shop on the quayside was one of the oldest properties in the town. A little window filled with anything from soiled jam-pot covers to rusty penny-whistles and balls of twine. On each side of the doorway, tiers of newspapers and lurid periodicals erected like ladders on strips of wood.

There was nobody in the shop when Littlejohn entered. The place exuded a musty smell like stale toast or dirty dish-cloths. The bell clanged as he opened the door and he had to go down two steps, for the stone floor was below street level.

A little grubby counter littered with cheap magazines, novelettes and racing literature. Disorderly shelves full of dusty stationery, bottles of ink, stacks of low grade fiction and pornographic paper-backs. On a revolving stand on the counter a lot of fly-blown, highly-coloured, libidinous post-cards.

There was hardly room to whip a cat round.

At the back, an open door, panelled in glass with a red cloth curtain across it for privacy. Hanging on this door, a mirror fixed at an angle which showed the occupant of the living-room beyond who was at the counter. Through this glass Littlejohn saw a distorted face looking at him.

"Well.... What d'yer want?" came from the inner room.

"Mr. Lee?"

"Yes."

"I want a word or two with you.... I'm a police officer. It's about Sam Prank."

"Come in."

Sitting in a chair before the fire was the ugliest old man Littlejohn had ever set eyes on. It was plain to see why Mr. Lee had been given the Rosie cognomen. His likeness was not to flowers but to Falstaff. "His face is all bubucles, and whelks, and knobs and flames of fire." Another bright red nose seemed to be trying to grow on the end of the original organ. He was obviously a seasoned alcoholic vessel, bearing the signs of his toping in the grog-blossom of his face. His mouth was large and fleshy and looked to have been frozen in its most accustomed position, that of sucking beer from a pint pot. His eyes were small and cunning and he had a bad cough which punctuated his every sentence and held-up the conversation whenever it grew dangerous.

Rosie Lee's gross body was sprawled all over a large armchair in which he was taking his ease. He did not rise, but turning his head fixed Littlejohn with a stare from two jellied eyes.

"I've bin expectin' *you*," he said hoarsely. "Guess somebody see Sam Prank leavin' my place on Saturday night. Can't keep anythin' private here...."

"The visit *was* private, then?"

"What d'yer think he was here at ten o'clock for? The mornin' paper?"

Whereupon Mr. Lee laughed himself into a paroxysm of coughing.

"'Ow, 'ow, I'm chokin'," he panted and applied himself to his panacea in a pint mug at his elbow. When it was over, he slowly emerged with bloodshot eyes and heaving chest from his state of suffocation. He was in his shirt sleeves, with no collar and his shirt-neck, unfastened, disclosed a pale, enormous, almost hairless chest as far as his breast bone.

Mr. Lee seemed to keep house for himself. The place was dirty and stank abominably of beer and stale air.

Business seemed slack. Littlejohn was sure that Lee kept himself alive by other means than selling papers and odd packets of cheap cigarettes. Another rival shop farther along the quay seemed to do a roaring trade. There was always a crowd round the counter. The shop girl was a pretty blonde....

"Now, Mr. Lee. Will you tell me what Sam Prank was doing here just before he was murdered?"

"Owed me some money and was arrangin' to pay some of it off. No harm in that ... I help lots of the sailors with a bit of ready cash now and

again. Proper good Samaritan to the boys is their Uncle Rosie Lee.”

“How much did Prank owe you, Mr. Lee?”

“Three hundred pounds.”

“Three hundred pounds!”

“I thought that ’ud take yer breath away. Yes. Three ’undred jimmy-o’-goblins is what Sam Prank owed his Uncle Rosie.”

“But surely that’s not the usual sort of loan you’d make to a sailor arriving for help after spending all his pay on a good binge?”

“Not on yer life, cocky. A bit of high finance, as yer might say, was that loan. Granted on note of hand only against his expectations from his wealthy old aunt to who ’is Uncle Rosie said he’d spill the beans if repayments wasn’t made right and proper.”

“What was the original sum you lent Prank?”

“Five ’undred of the best, mister. Got ’imself in a proper jam, did Sam Prank. Got a girl out of South Redport, one o’ the ports the *Bluebell* calls at, got ’er in the fam’ly way. And her with an ’usband as ’ad bin in the Middle East for two years. Sam ’ad to pay to ’ush it up, *and* pay the doctor’s bill, *and* pay somebody to adopt the kid when it came.... But ’e didn’t tell that to ’is uncle Rosie. Oh dear, no. ‘I’ve bin bettin’,’ sez ’is nibs.”

“How did you get to know, then?”

“Don’t think I wuz goin’ to lend five ’undred o’ my ’ard-earned smackers agen a tale like that, do yer? No. I gave a quid to one o’ Sam’s shipmates to do a bit o’ snoopin’ round for me, see? An’ my scout walks right into the whole bag o’ tricks when they puts-in at Redport. Follers Sam to his light o’ love’s house and then gets talkin’ to the local gossip, see? The whole tale came out.”

“So you lent him the money?”

“Why not? Old ’arriet Prank was well known to me. I knew wot she was worth to within a few thousands. Got me scouts out agen, see? Found out that Sam was all right by ’arriet’s Will. Why, a bank ’ud ’a lent ’im the dough against security like that. Besides, I’d got another way o’ making Master Sam behave ’is self. All I gotter do was jest to let his aunt know as her lovin’ nephew was leading a wild life and she’d ’a cut ’im off with a shillin’. Very straight-laced was ole ’arriet.”

“I see. And did Sam pay off his loan and his interest as arranged?”

“Yes. More or less.”

“And what was the purpose of the call late on Saturday? Was he bringing you another instalment?”

Mr. Lee paused for another lacerating convulsion of coughing and spitting and then resumed.

“No. Called to say ’e couldn’t pay. Said he’d ’ad a bit o’ bad luck on ’is last voyage. ’ad his pocket picked and all the cash ’e’d drawn he’d need to keep ’im goin’ till he got his next pay.”

“And you said?”

“Told ’im he’d better get it from somewhere, and I wasn’t foolin’. You see, when you lend money to the boys like I do, you gotta keep ’em under control. Once let ’em off their payments and you’re done. Sign o’ weakness they think it is, see? So I tole Sam Prank I’d give ’im till Monday to pay me somethin’.... Nothing less than ten quid, I sez, or else to Miss ’arriet I goes....”

“And Sam said?”

“’e’d get it. I think ’e usedter go to ’is aunt himself with some tale or other and touch ’er for a few pounds whenever he’d boozed ’is wages away and couldn’t pay me. One spell, he got quite good. Paid off a couple of ’undred quid of the principal. Quite a shock to me.”

“Did he get a windfall from Miss Harriet, then?”

“No fear. I’d say ten quid would be the ole girl’s limit. Two ’undred’s quite out o’ the question.”

“Any idea where it came from?”

“’ow should I know? All I know is, it was in good ’onest pound notes, which was good enough for Uncle Rosie....”

The shop-bell tinkled and Lee stretched himself to catch the reflection of the newcomer in the mirror on the door.

“What is it?” he bawled.

“Penny bottle of ink,” replied a child’s voice.

“Go an’ get it at Humphrey’s further down ...” shouted Lee, and the child obediently trotted off. The odds and ends of the shop were small beer to Mr. Rosie Lee. He had larger fish to fry.

“Have you no idea where the lump sum came from?” persisted Littlejohn.

“’ow the ’ell should I know?” impatiently replied the ugly old man and coughed away his irritation violently.

“These sailors do get in on rackets, you know,” he volunteered at length. “Some of ’em black-marketing or doin’ a bit o’ smugglin’. It’s offen easy to carry stuff about on a coaster and dispose of it at a good profit to here a one and there a one at the ports....”

“I see. So, with the exception of the two hundred pounds in a lump sum, Sam Prank hasn’t been very flush with money. Just paid a bit when he could?”

“That’s right. An’ that’s all I know. He jest called ’ere on Saturday to say ’e couldn’t pay me, and I sent ’im off and told ’im he’d better find the dough if ’e knew what was good for ’im. So off ’e went and never seen agen ...”

“And with him your money, eh?”

Rosie Lee was seized with a more violent spasm of coughing than ever. To such an extent was he racked, that he sprang to his feet and performed a sort of salaam, as though trying to squeeze an imprisoned demon out of his chest.

At length he was fit to gulp down more beer and flopped exhausted in his chair again.

“My money, did yer say? Oh, that’s all right. I got Sam’s note of hand and ’is aunt ’avin’ died first, Sam’s exors’ll get the dough and pay-out ’is debts. So I’m O.K., see?”

“I see. And is that all, Mr. Lee?”

“The whole bloody issue as far as I’m concerned. You ’aven’t got a thing agen me, so don’t be tryin’ anythin’ on. I jest did Sam a good turn when ’e needed a friend. A good Samaritan to the boys is their Uncle Rosie, as I said before.”

“Well, I may call again shortly if anything turns up. You’ll be about, I suppose, Mr. Lee?”

“Do I look as if I’m goin’ to take up me bed an’ do a bunk?”

“No. But we found you out all day yesterday, when we were most anxious to interview you.”

“Can’t a chap even ’ave a rest on Sundays now without the police ’avin’ a lot to say about it?”

Littlejohn was glad to get in the open air and away from the repulsive old man, whom he left still indolently spread in his chair with his pot of beer.

“He just seems to run the shop as a side-line,” said Hoggatt when Littlejohn got back to the police station and told him the result of his visit. “A boy who’s just left school gets the papers from the station when they arrive, delivers a few on a sort of round, and then spreads the rest out in the shop. As far as I can gather, there’s not much legitimate business done there. The old chap’s quite well-known as a sailors’ money-lender, however. Sort of shark they go to when they’ve boozed away their pay and want a bit to get on with till the next draw.”

“Yes. He told me that quite frankly. Candidly, I don’t like the fellow at all. Besides being a dreadful looking old chap, he’s a wily rogue as well, or I’m a Dutchman. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he didn’t mix a spot of blackmail with his other activities. He’s got the air of a well-fed spider, a corrupt bloodsucker, about him and I’ll bet if it were known there’s plenty in his catalogue that would earn him a spell in gaol. We must keep an eye on him, although he’s a crafty devil. He seems to run a sort of private enquiry bureau of his own, too. Keeping track of the activities of the clients to whom he makes loans...”

Cromwell entered after his efforts among the crew of the *Bluebell*. He was dressed in grey flannels and a tweed jacket and had abandoned his bowler hat for a light grey soft felt. Since his marriage he had gradually relaxed in matters of dress and improved in taste and the style of his clothes. Which was all to the honour of Mrs. Cromwell. Now, he looked like a parson on holiday, for nothing could remove the ecclesiastical cut from his face.

“Well, how did it go?” asked Littlejohn.

“Not so bad,” answered Cromwell with his usual reserve. “It seems Sam Prank was on top of the world when he was murdered. From what I’ve heard from one of his mates on the ship, I’d say he was blackmailing somebody...”

VIII

THE *BLUEBELL*

CROMWELL had no difficulty in locating the *Bluebell* when he sought her out among the craft moored in the inner basin. Several loafers, mistaking him for an evangelist in search of souls, watched him with eyes dilated with curiosity and then, hearing him ask for the ship, assumed he was a lawyer calling for the gear of the deceased Sam Prank and offered to show him the way in the hope of gathering crumbs of information. The detective, however, turned upon them his most terrifying look, nay, he hurled it at them like a boomerang and they melted away discomfited.

The *Bluebell* had a local reputation for being a steady, well-behaved and good ship and the captain had had no difficulty in filling Sam Prank's place. The new recruit, a man with no chin and peering eyes, like those of a myopic who had lost his spectacles, was just being initiated into his duties by his shipmates. In addition to the skipper and mate, who were in the owner's office, the *Bluebell* carried a crew of five. The engineer, his assistant, who also was fireman, and three deck-hands. The mechanical side of the party was busy cleaning machinery and getting up steam; the remaining trio were mopping-up after taking on a cargo of limestone.

Cromwell made his way gingerly across the gangway. Judging from his age, bearing and the way he was leaving most of the work to the other two, one who must have been the senior seaman detached himself from the group and accosted the intruder. He looked officious and ready to throw the sergeant overboard.

"Hey, you! Wotcher after?"

Cromwell had again been mistaken for a parson evangelising or else hunting for copy for a series of sermons. He explained who he was and what he wanted in far from clerical terms.

"Why didn't yer say so at first?" thundered the sailor and slapped Cromwell on the back. Whereas, hitherto, the deck-hand had been treating the detective like a snob who cuts dead someone he knows in the street, now he became as one who, having discovered that the victim is a grocer

and able to confer benefits from beneath the counter, fawns upon him in hope of favours to come.

“Come below.... We’ll be quiet there. Prank was a special pal o’ mine.”

They went forward and descended into a dark cabin reeking of tar, bilge and rancid ham. Cromwell didn’t like it at all and thought how easily he might be shanghaied and carried off, although, unknown to him, the imminent trip was merely to Sunderland.

“Let’s get a drink at one of the pubs on the quay,” he said. Things moved with such rapidity after this suggestion, that before he knew where he was, the sergeant found himself in the snug of the “Hardstone Arms” with a pint of beer before him and his companion, Breeze, with his nose in another.

There was no question of alibis for the crew of the ship. The local police had checked the movements of each of Prank’s shipmates and found them easily accounted for. Captain, mate and two of the crew had been drinking with parties who gave them confirmation and testimonials. The remainder, more homely men, had been in the bosoms of their large families with plenty to prove it. So, it was for some background about the murdered man that Littlejohn had sent his subordinate.

As a source of information, Ted Breeze proved to be an empty vessel. All he knew was that Sam Prank was a good chap, fond of the girls, free with his money, and, God bless yer, too much of a Don Jewon to get married. He liked ’em, but not enough to marry ’em. Loved ’em and left ’em, did Sam, and managed to keep from gettin’ himself entangled in matrimony, the artful, lucky devil!

Cromwell regarded the pint of beer as wasted and rose to go before there was any suggestion of paying for another.

Outside they met the captain and mate of the *Bluebell*. They heard them, first, however.

“Ahoy there, Breeze, you lazy bastard, what d’ye think you’re doin’...? Forgotten we sail next tide?”

Breeze opened his mouth but no words would flow and Cromwell had to explain the situation.

“Come aboard,” said the Captain and pushed the detective before him to his own small cabin behind the bridge.

“Cobb’s my name. Yours?”

“Detective-Sergeant Cromwell, of Scotland Yard...”

“Good God! That bad is it? Have a drink?”

Cobb poured out tots of rum and Cromwell, drinking too copiously, felt to have swallowed an incendiary bomb which burst into a thousand burning fragments among his viscera.

“Confidentially, Mr. Cobb,” he said when he had recovered from his convulsions. “Confidentially, we haven’t got the slightest line on who killed Sam Prank. All the possibles we’ve looked at so far have watertight alibis....”

“Includin’ yours truly,” thundered Captain Cobb and laughed so loudly that he shook down a shaving-brush, two razors and a tooth-brush minus bristles from a narrow ledge over a miniature washbowl. “Good job I got an h’alibi. Many a time I could ’a’ murdered Sam Prank, good hand though he was....”

“Why?”

“H’impident, that’s what he was. H’impident. Took ’is orders with a sneerin’ sort o’ smile, as if he didn’t want to do, but was just ’umourin’ you, like. But I always got my turn. Come pay day and Sam spent-up, as ’e always was, he’d sing a different tune....”

“A spender, eh?”

“Spender? That’s a mild word. Threw it about like water, he did. Women ...”

Captain Cobb breathed the last word with hoarse awe like one who utters a magic formula before a closed door, and jerked his head knowingly.

“Ah!” said Cromwell.

“Now I see you standin’ Ted Breeze a drink ashore. No good, that. Ted Breeze doesn’t know a thing. Too much of a talker is Ted to be in Sam’s confidence. Neither was I in Sam’s confidence, as you might say. Captains never are with the crew, except when it’s a case of wantin’ advances of pay, like Sam did. Then, like as not, he’d not tell a proper tale and come with some cock-an’-bull rubbish. Now, if you was to ask Tom Kitchin, that’s the chap with the big ears as you’d see cleanin’ on deck ... Tom’s yer man. See Tom.... See ’im in here. I’m goin’ down to the engines.... Not that I’ll be welcome, but goin’ down I am....”

And with that Captain Cobb made his exit and could be heard shouting for Tom Kitchin in a voice which reverberated round the quays and echoed

across Hardstone Head and back.

A skinny, furtive man with a receding forehead, a snub nose and a big mouth overflowing with yellow teeth presented himself, standing in the doorway as though ready to beat a speedy retreat if provoked to flight. His large ears looked like an afterthought of whoever fashioned him, stuck on his head for lifting him bodily.

“Want me?”

“You Tom Kitchin? Sit down, Tom.”

The sailor did so with some reluctance, still looking like a rabbit which suspects a gun is pointed in his direction and struggles between safety and curiosity.

“You knew Sam Prank?”

“Yes, kind o’ style, I knew ’im.”

“You were his pal, I hear?”

“Well ... sort o’ ...”

“Know anything about what he did when he was ashore....”

“He was fond of ’is beer and fonder than any of us of the girls. Married or single, they didn’t matter. S’long as they was good lookers and ready, they suited Sam, kind o’ style.”

Kitchin kept interpolating the silly phrase like a man with the hiccough.

“You seem to know all about it, Tom. Did you go out on philandering trips with him then?”

“Who? Me? Not bloody likely. I’m married, I am, and four kids.... Let the wife once ’ear o’ me on the tiles and ...”

Words failed him to describe the hideous punishment he would undergo.

“But I’ve kep’ tabs on ’im for a pal o’ mine as lent Sam money and wanted to know where it was goin’...”

“You have, Tom?”

“Sure thing. Followed ’im at one place we put-in at and found as he’d fathered a baby on a married woman....’orrible thing to do. *And* ’e was using my pal’s money to ’ush it up, kind o’ style.”

“Who was your pal?”

“Ain’t tellin’. Paid to keep me mouth shut, I was, and Tom Kitchin’s word’s ’is bond, kinder, s’welp me....”

“I see. Can’t do Sam Prank any harm now, you know, to tell me all you know.”

“Yes, but Rosie....”

“Who? A woman, eh?”

“Never you mind. Tryin’ to trip me up, kinder style ...?”

“All right, forget it then, Tom. Sam was always short of money, was he?”

“He’s been more flush of late. Seemed to ’ave found somewhere to touch a bit.... Always usedter be borrowin’ and wantin’ advances of pay. Blued his money in like water down a drain. Then, he seemed to land in easy street.”

“He did? And how was that?”

Cromwell passed a cigarette to Kitchen and lit one himself. The sailor gulped down smoke and vomited it forth like a dragon from his nostrils.

“Well, he’s dead and past ’armin’.... I think he was screwin’ it out o’ somebody....”

“Blackmail, eh?”

“Well ... call it that if you want.”

“Who was he blackmailing?”

“Eh, guv’nor, ask me another. How should I know? Is it likely he’d tell me and share his ’en that laid the golden h’eggs with somebody else?”

“No, perhaps not. But what sort of racket was it? I mean, how was he doing it. Had he seen somebody doing something or in some sort of dishonest business ...?”

“If you ask me, it was love letters he’d got. Once, when he was half-tight, he showed me a bundle as he kep’ in his pocket. Looked like letters, they did, as he’d picked-up or pinched from somewhere. My little gold mine, he sez, and winks, like. Then, he shut up, ’aving realised that perhaps he’d said a bit too much, kind o’ style.”

“I see. And that’s all you can tell me?”

“All as I can remember....”

“Did you ever see the letters again, Tom?”

“No. I seem to reckerlect Sam saying ’e was puttin’ ’em in a safe place, which usually amounts to leavin’ ’em with a pal you can trust ashore. When you go to sea and get drunk at ports o’ call, like Sam did, safest is to leave yer valuables with a pal at home.”

“And who might Sam’s pal have been?”

“I can guess, but I ain’t tellin’, see? That’d be givin’ away the bloke what paid me to shadder ’im as I was tellin’ you about.”

“Oh indeed. Very well, Tom. You’ve helped me a lot. I hope we needn’t bother you again. But I warn you, we might want to know who Rosie is—and if you won’t tell me, you’ll have to tell somebody else in court on oath....”

“Well I’ll tell somebody else in court on oath, then. I’m known as a bloke you can trust and a bloke you can trust I stays, see?”

“Right, Tom. Get yourself a drink before you sail and no ill feelings....”

“No ill feelin’s, guv’nor, thanks ... thanks....”

Still expressing his thanks, the man slid through the door and was off.

Captain Cobb returned snorting and blowing from his tour of inspection.

“What happened to Sam Prank’s kit after he was killed, Captain Cobb?”

“It’s on deck waitin’ for somebody to claim it. I told Jane Prank when I saw her earlier to-day, ‘Jane,’ I says, ‘Jane, if you don’t send somebody to clear off Sam’s stuff, I won’t be responsible. The crew’ll divide it up once we get out to sea.’ But she didn’t seem interested.”

“May I look at it?”

“Surely.”

The Captain hurried on deck and returned with a canvas kit-bag which he dropped on the floor with a bump.

“There ye are. Help yourself....”

Cromwell knew he had no right to be rummaging among the dead man’s effects, but he could not resist the opportunity.

There was nothing of interest among the tidily arranged mass of shaving-tackle, brushes, odds and ends of clothing and cleaning materials. There was a collection of cheap studio photographs of several girls. Sam Prank’s lights o’ love at one time and another. They were all good-looking in a heavy kind of way. Prank seemed to be fond of a certain type, plump, bold, broad-bosomed.

Cobb chuckled to himself.

“A one for the girls was Sam.... Proper way he had with ’em. Hullo, what’s that?”

It was a Bible.... “To Sam with love from his father and mother on his twenty-first birthday....” A faded photograph of a comfortable-looking

elderly woman taken years ago, fell out. Cromwell retrieved it and replaced it without a word.

“Nothing here,” said Cromwell at length, carefully replacing the articles in the sack and tugging tight the draw-string. “He must have left his letters and the like somewhere else.”

“Never kept anything like that, if I’m a judge,” rumbled Cobb. “Often used to see him readin’ his mail and then, into pieces he’d tear it and throw it over the side into the sea. Not one for keepin’ his old love letters...”

“But suppose he’d something else he *wanted* to keep? Valuable papers and such? Would anybody of the name of Rosie keep them? His best girl ...?”

Captain Cobb burst into roars of laughter which again threatened to shake down all the movables in the tiny cabin.

“Rosie ... his best girl! That’s a good one. A proper scream that is. Have you ever seen Rosie, mister?”

“No. I shouldn’t be asking you about her if I had.”

“Her ... her.... Listen to him! Rosie’s not a woman, but one of the foulest-looking old men you’ve ever set eyes on. A pal o’ Sam’s, was Rosie. Used to lend him money, I hear.... Aye, probable that Sam left his valuables with Rosie as security.”

“Where does this Rosie live?”

“Lee’s the name; Rosie’s the nickname, because of his complexion ... ho! ho! ho! Lives at the little newspaper shop at the far end o’ the quay....”

“That’s a bit of useful news....”

“And now, mister, I’ll have to ask you to be off. We sail next tide and I’ve work to do....”

Having thus outstayed his welcome, Cromwell thanked and bade goodbye to Captain Cobb and made off hastily to report to his chief. He tried out the Rosie Lee joke on Littlejohn and was greatly disappointed to find that his chief was not to be taken in by it and, what was more provoking still, had already met that horrid old man.

IX

THE HOLY NAME

ONE of the foremost personalities in Littlejohn's mind in the Werrymouth murder case was Canon Conant, priest at the Holy Name Church, who had caused such a sensation by his evidence and collapse at the recent inquest.

The detective had made up his mind to interview the clergyman as soon as he was fit to be visited and with that in view had arranged for a curate to telephone him when the canon was better.

The message came remarkably soon. Once in the capable hands of his own physician, who brought him back to normal by the judicious use of sugar-lumps and insulin, Canon Conant was quickly himself again and although not yet able to resume work in his large and busy church, was fit to receive the Inspector and answer a few simple but vital questions.

The Holy Name serves a large proportion of the population of Werrymouth and, being the only one of its denomination there, with the exception of the chapel of Werrymouth Abbey, it becomes at times in the course of its ministrations, almost like a department-store. Coffins come and go. Baptisms never seem to cease. Marriages are continually being celebrated. Queues of penitents sit on forms outside the confessional boxes of their favourite confessors like patients in a doctor's shop.

As Littlejohn, trying to find his way to the presbytery, entered the building, he was met on the steps by a christening party carrying-off in triumph a newly baptised infant. They had had to rush it a bit to clear the decks for a Requiem.

The church was a pleasant place. Plain walls, plain furnishing, simple altar, pretty side-chapels. Littlejohn stood by a large stained-glass window in which a blue and red father was depicted receiving a prodigal son, naked and purple from head to foot, with the exception of a geranium coloured loincloth. In the background stood a disapproving elder brother clad in green before what looked like a drop curtain. The artist, apparently more skilled in glass than in hagiology, had placed a halo over the father's head and canonised him by mistake.

Everybody was occupied and about his business and Littlejohn had to seek hard to find somebody to show him the way. A young fellow in Army uniform was, being married to a girl in Air Force blue in one of the chapels. A junior priest was tying the knot and pitching his voice in a low key as though torn between mourning for the dead—for the Requiem had begun at the High Altar—and rejoicing with the happy pair he was uniting until death did them part.

“... marriage is a state not lightly to be entered into,” he admonished, as if he, a celibate of thirty-four, knew all about it! But he was going to give them their money’s worth.

The air smelled of incense and candle-grease. A motley crowd of mourners stood bunched together in the nave like a flock of rooks and the smell of mothballs fought like some malicious demon with the more celestial odours.

The voice of the celebrant, resonant as a tolling bell, rang round the building and ascended into the great void between the huddle of human beings below and the high timbered roof.

A catafalque surrounded by candles stood out, grimly towering above those assembled about it.

“Dominus vobiscum....”

“Do you, William Francis Peter, take ...?”

An undertaker, dressed in an ancient frock-coat, possibly looted from a secondhand shop, and wearing trousers which fell like concertinas over his heavy black boots, tip-toed down the aisle anxiously sizing-up how long the burial service would take, for he was in charge of a third-class funeral when the present superlative one was over. He coughed into his curly-brimmed top-hat and his boots creaked reverently. He looked like a chimpanzee toggged-up for a children’s party at the Zoo. Littlejohn asked him for directions, but he was deaf to all but the priest’s final word and passed on.

“Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine....”

“I pronounce you man and wife....”

The dead and the living each receiving his due!

The bridegroom was kissing the bride whilst behind them, a large woman was for some reason weeping, and a man with a red nose was eagerly pawing at the happy pair in his anxiety to get the next kiss from the girl.

"Ite. Missa est..." called the celebrant at the main event.

An atmosphere of relief seemed to surge over the place like a breath of sea air, as the priest and his following descended to the coffin, chanting. They got busy with censer and aspergillum, like men fumigating and watering a young and precious plant instead of ushering out a tired body....

On the steps of the church they were having to bustle off the newly-weds. It wouldn't have done to be throwing confetti when the bier was being borne out....

Desperately, Littlejohn clutched at the gown of an acolyte, who, having fulfilled his function of ringing the bell at the Elevation, had somehow been elbowed out of the proceedings when they descended to the body of the church. The boy's face was covered in the light down of adolescence and he looked full of mischief.

"How can I get to Father Conant's quarters?" asked the detective.

The boy's solemn, set, ceremonial expression fell from him like a mask.

"Show you the way when this lot's off the premises, sir. They'll be done with in two ticks...."

Eventually Littlejohn found himself in the shabby presbytery in Rendel Street, next door to the church. He need not have waited at all in the Holy Name, he discovered, for wedged between two warehouses was the door of the priest's house.

"Difficult to find your way in if you're a stranger," said Canon Conant, who was seated in his study in a large armchair with a rug round his feet and legs. He looked very much better and greeted his visitor cordially. Littlejohn took a fancy to him right away. He had a feeling, too, that the priest approved of him, for the scrutiny of the kindly searching blue eyes was gentle and whimsical. No doubt, on occasion, it could be very much otherwise.

The room was dark and a large window overlooked the quay. The sounds of winches, cranes, and freight lorries combined with the tearing of gears by 'buses coming and going in the nearby depôt to constitute a kind of infernal hymn howled by a choir of demons sent by the powers below to drown every utterance of the holy man.

Right outside the window a steamer was discharging its cargo of new buckets and zinc tanks on to a waiting lorry. The row was deafening. The

dockers handled the merchandise without respect for the ears of the neighbourhood.

Canon Conant was quite undisturbed by this torrent of demoniacal noise and, like a weaver who can carry on conversation above the clack of the shuttle, conversed urbanely as though used to the pandemonium all day and night. Littlejohn kept pausing and asking the good man's pardon for some information he couldn't pick-up and finally he had edged his chair so close to that of his companion that they were sitting side by side like two old cronies sunning themselves in the park.

"I won't take up a lot of your time, sir," began Littlejohn when they were settled. "In fact, I oughtn't to be disturbing you now in your condition, but I think perhaps you have some information you could give us which might considerably shorten our work on the Prank case if you'd ..."

"I'm sorry about the scene the other day, Inspector. I ought never to have gone to court in my condition. Worry and stress tend to affect me that way and I must confess a murder among my flock bowled me right over..."

"I'm sure it did. You never ought to have been faced with the ordeal at such a time."

"However, perhaps I can tell you one or two things, although, as I told the Coroner, nothing said in confession can pass my lips."

"I appreciate that, Canon Conant, and don't expect it..."

"Very well, then. About a week ago, Miss Harriet Prank came to confession. Before we got down to business however, I had met and spoken with her in the church. She seemed to want to talk to someone and unburdened herself to me.... She said she was sure that her cousin Jane, who kept house for her, and her nephew, Sam, were planning to rob her. She had overheard them talking. It seems Sam was short of money and was asking Jane if his aunt kept any handy in the house. He also said he wished she'd ... I think the term was kick the bucket ... Yes, kick the bucket ... and then he'd get what was coming to him."

"Indeed, sir. And what did she say to that?"

"First of all, Inspector, let's be clear on this point. Miss Harriet was supposed to be upstairs in bed—it was early morning. Actually, she was down in the kitchen getting ready to wash. They've no bathrooms in Pleasant Street, of course. This wretched pair were talking, as many others do behind one's back, freely and with a certain amount of exaggeration and

bravado. We're both men of the world enough to know that many would-be beneficiaries under the Wills of old people who just won't die, talk like that, don't they?"

"I quite agree, father."

The priest smiled and nodded benignly and rhythmically moved back and forth in his rocking-chair.

"I told Miss Prank that and urged her not to worry about it. She was fond of Sam and agreed that he was a likeable scamp.... But there was another matter which was more serious. Miss Harriet had grown afraid of Jane Prank for some reason. Jane, it seems, had developed a grudge against her employer. She thought she ought to be better paid. Not only that, she thought her cousin ought to hand her out something in advance ... a bonus, shall we say ... for the sacrifice she was making. Apparently, she thought she could earn more on munitions than in tending her relative, but didn't make a change out of consideration for the aged lady. That was grievance number one. Number two was, I think, that Miss Harriet persisted in living on and keeping Jane from her legacy. All the family knew the contents of Harriet's Will and were eagerly waiting. Jane was getting tired and Harriet was afraid she might hurry the course of nature one day ..."

The priest rocked himself to and fro in his rocking-chair and the loaders of tinware outside were creating a bigger hullabaloo than ever. There was a terrific crash as four stacks of buckets fell from the sling of a crane on the quay.

"Why, did Miss Harriet think Jane might murder her ...?" cried Littlejohn in a voice so loud that the cat left the hearth and fled under the ancient chiffonier, whilst the priest looked a bit askance at the Inspector as though mutely accusing him of unseemly brawling.

"I gather Jane kept giving her queer looks as though wishing her ill," he replied when the racket had subsided.

"I see. Not much grounds for suspecting murder though, sir."

"No. I told her that and comforted her. But now that this has occurred, I feel that I ought to tell you ..."

"I wonder ..." mused Littlejohn.

"Eh?"

"I wonder if that bright pair planned evil jointly against the old lady."

"You mean, Inspector ...?"

“I mean, suppose they did plan to do that job together. Jane, knowing the effects of the digitalis ... perhaps she’d *seen* them when the old lady had taken too much before ... knowing the effects, gave her an overdose. The doctor said it wasn’t a thumping great overdose. Perhaps three times more than she should have had and not enough, I understand, to kill a normal person. If it was discovered ... well ... the old lady had made a mistake. We mustn’t forget that the digitalis was in a glass of milk and the police were just in time to prevent Jane from pouring the remnants down the sink....”

“Dear me!”

“Harriet only drank half the contents, however.... It didn’t knock her out properly, but Jane hoping it would, tried to make herself an alibi by going next door for brandy and assistance and taking a long time in getting them. Meanwhile, Sam calls to see how their plan is working and finds the old lady hasn’t passed-out. So he finishes off the job....”

“Quite a theory, Inspector, but have you any facts to support it?”

“Not many, I’m afraid, father. Sam Prank is dead and past questioning. Jane is queer and as close as an oyster and blames Sam for it all. She also says the old lady attended to her own medicine, although I don’t believe it. Was Miss Harriet in full possession of her faculties?”

“All of them, except her eyesight. Cataracts coming. She was handicapped in that respect and I can assure you she didn’t look after her own medicine. She’s told me that.... She was terrified of an overdose after the doctor had warned her to be careful. No. Jane must have given her the medicine that night.... I’m sure of it.”

“In that case, I’d better call round at Pleasant Street again right away and have another long talk with Miss Jane. I must get to the bottom of this business. It’s confusing the other case.... Sam Prank’s murder, I mean.”

“I’m sure it is. If I can be of further help, call again, Inspector. By the way, I think I ought to mention, too, that another cause of family trouble among the Pranks was religious. Miss Harriet belonged to the Mother Church; the rest, it seems, members of an old family of heretics, attended a sect called the Burning Bushers. Harriet was a convert to our Church....”

“So I’ve been informed, father....”

“You have, have you?”

“And now I must be off and my thanks, sir.”

They parted and Littlejohn made his way back through the church to the quay again.

It was evening and the weather was fine. The sunset foretold a fine day on the morrow and the clear sky was reflected in the still water of the dock like a sheet of green glass. Some naked boys were swimming in one of the basins and a policeman was bawling at them from the bank to come out of it. The dockers were still busy removing what seemed to be an interminable cargo of hardware from the ship moored near the presbytery....

The pubs on the quayside were full. Sounds of laughter and singing echoed along the line of warehouses and offices. The man on the swing-bridge was busy collecting toll from passengers crossing to the town for the pictures. He was glaring at them as they passed through the turnstiles, for his dyspepsia was bothering him. He was at his best just after a meal. Later, his stomach got acid and poured its corrosive contents over his duodenum and the world changed from calm to storm....

Littlejohn made his way to Pleasant Street after tea. Already Mr. Menelaus was busily frying. A blast of hot noisesome-smelling fat bathed the street, like a bugle calling the hungry to the canteen and the inhabitants began to emerge from their houses with basins and other utensils in which to secure and bear away the fruits of Mr. Menelaus's labours.

The Inspector knocked at Number 27. The blind was drawn and no one seemed at home. He knocked again, louder this time. No reply. Then, from Number 29 appeared a stocky, eager-looking woman with a mop of tousled white hair and several tiers of chins. The strains of a harmonium on which somebody was trying to play piano music emerged with her....

"Is Miss Prank in?" Littlejohn asked.

"Haven't you heard?" answered the woman, rearing as though astonished at his ignorance.

"Heard what?"

"She's been taken away to the asylum.... Went to chapel with a friend of 'ers and was taken bad there. Shoutin' and screamin', they say she was.... They say she tried to strangle somebody ... Terrible ... Her mind's broke down under the strain, that's what it is.... They say she ..."

But Littlejohn hadn't time to listen to what they said. He was off to the police station as fast as his legs would go.

X

OUT GOES SHE

THE credit must go to the Rev. Micah Scewbody for the elimination of the Harriet Prank case, which for a time cluttered up the whole of Littlejohn's investigation into the family tragedy.

Mr. Scewbody, that fervid fisher of men, was the high-and-mightiness of the denomination of the Burning Bushers, of which Jane Prank was a baptised member. Zeal and eloquence had raised the Rev. Micah from the lowly calling of stone-mason's labourer to that of searing light of his sect. He was attached to no particular chapel, but held a roving commission, burning his way through the scattered congregation of the Bush, whipping them into frenzies of repentance and rededication, baptising, proselytising, scorching and terrifying them. It took about six months for the spiritual eruptions caused by his missions to die down, by which time he had travelled full circle and was back again. He thus kept the denominational kettle on the boil.

Since the death of her cousin Harriet, Jane Prank's behaviour had been strange. She took to wringing her hands, talking incoherently to herself and wandering aimlessly about the house with her eyes fixed on a spot somewhere in space. From time to time, Captain Sprankling, in his capacity as executor, caused a diversion by calling to keep watch on the chattels of the estate, but he soon grew tired of this. The fishing boats in the bay had struck good catches and the Captain was unable to restrain the impulse to make a few pounds. So he left the furniture to look after itself after assuring himself that the spare car and odd bits of jewellery left by the deceased were safely lodged at the bank.

That left Jane with only Miss Toke as companion. That foreboding woman was not to be shaken off. Since the death of her father, Miss Toke had lived alone on a very meagre income. She had in mind parking herself on Jane for good if she could manage it. No doubt Harriet would have left her cousin the home intact and what more likely than that Jane would need a companion there? Jane had been glad to sleep at the Toke cottage since

Miss Prank's death and by day Clarice Toke had kept her company as she tried to sort out things at Pleasant Street.

On the day before the funeral of the two victims, Jane Prank seemed to have reached the end of her resources, physical and mental. She had hardly slept since the murders and Clarice Toke had heard her crying out in the night as though, having dozed, she had been roused by bad dreams.

Usually spiteful and venomous, the Toke was on her best behaviour in view of the arrangement she hoped shortly to press upon Jane.

"Shall I make you a cup of tea, dear ...?"

"There, there, don't take on so. Your aunt's with the Lord, never fear...."

"You did the best you could, dear Jane. Nobody could have done more.... It's God's will. We all have to die sometime...."

And so on. Over and over again, like the turning of a prayer wheel.

Jane lapped it up. It was mildly pleasing to have someone dancing attendance. She knew what Miss Toke was after and it wasn't coming off.

Only once did the dark woman's curiosity get the better her.

I wonder how the pills *did* get in the glass.... *You* had charge of the medicine, hadn't you, Jane dear?"

"Get out! Get out! Accusing me of killing her, are you? I won't have you in the house. Get out!"

The Toke had to use a few tears and a lot of soft soap to calm Jane, who slowly recovered from her frenzy and forgot about packing-off her friend.

It was after early tea that Miss Toke suggested that they should go to chapel.

"After all, Jane dear, there's comfort to be found among one's fellow worshippers. We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, you know...."

Clarice had it all off pat. Her father had been a deacon of the Bushers and she had been brought up on unction.

"... Mr. Scewbody's there every night this week, you remember."

Excess of one passion, grief, anger, even anxiety, seems to stimulate others. Jane Prank had a weakness for the Reverend Micah. He was a bachelor wedded to The Cause. Perhaps now that she was coming into money. The thought of Scewbody in the town, prowling after souls shook Jane out of her langour. Miss Toke had to remind, her that there was yet an

hour to service time. Jane saw impatiently waiting with her hat on and the Toke gave her malicious sidelong glances, the livid spot on her face effulgent with jealousy and malevolence.

They arrived late at the chapel. The 'bus along the promenade, at the end of which the tabernacle, formerly a billiard-hall, was established, was crowded and they had to walk.

The Bushers were under way.

So near to the Kingdom! Yet what dost thou lack?
So near to the Kingdom! What keepeth thee back?
To die with no hope! And thy soul to be lost!
Unwilling to give up thy sin! Count the cost!

They had worked themselves up already. There was fervent and shrill. Some of the congregation looked like Indians on the warpath, whooping frenziedly, heads jerking, eyes rolling.

As soon as the hymn was finished, Scewbody was on his feet. A tall, black-bearded man with long arms, drooping shoulders and a yellow constipated complexion. He launched into prayer at once and for twenty-five minutes brought the world and its sins in a grand march-past before the Throne of Grace. He was a spell-binder without a doubt. Once on the rampage, he had the faculty of kindling excitement in the breasts of his hearers. As he prayed, his discourse was punctuated incessantly by the exultant shouts of those in the body of the church.

The place needed the pencil of Rowlandson properly to describe it. Games of any kind were anathema to the Bushers and they had made a good job of removing every trace of billiards from the building. At one end, a double-decker pulpit. Mr. Scewbody in the top tier; Mr. Lambert, who gave out the hymns, in the bottom. Then facing them, a series of plain wood pews, almost like cattle-pens, with high backs over the tops of which only the heads of worshippers could be seen when they were seated. In the front pew sat five deaf old people who, whenever one of the occupants of the twin-pulpit rose, elevated their ear-trumpets eagerly like a battery of horn players ready for *The Royal Hunt and Storm in the Forest*.

Sometimes, when children were allowed at service, they were penned in the second pew and the occupants of the third kept them in order by hanging over the partition from time to time and poking them with umbrellas.

The harmonium provided the accompaniment for sing-and was operated by a young lady who played viciously. Some of the tunes she could not play at all these were, therefore, blacklisted. Others she either played too fast or too slow, according to whether she knew them well or not, thus, either dragging the singers along by the scruffs of their necks or having them overtake and trample upon her like cattle stampeding. When the singing reached fever-heat, the frenzied congregation ignored the organist, drove her along until she could stand it no more and then compelled her to drop out of the race, silence the organ, and wait for the next verse, like one who, having been thrown from a roundabout, gathers himself together and, as it comes round again, flings himself wildly back in the whirlpool.

Jane Prank and the Toke were sucked into this stew-pond of evangelism almost as soon as they put their heads in at the door. In next to no time, they were bawling and shouting with the rest, hooting with approval as Mr. Scew-body laid on the lash.

The sermon was strong meat. Mr. Scewbody had ordered all lights except that on his reading-desk to be extinguished. The last dim daylight filtered forlornly through the windows. The reading-lamp suffused the pastor's face with a yellow glow and illuminated his beard and long thin nose, so that he looked like a two dimensional figure in a stained-glass window. On the white wall behind, was flung a long shadow of Scewbody's head and shoulders, which, as he twisted and turned in the warmth of his subject, changed rapidly into a series of silhouettes. A turnip on a plate, The Old Duke, Shylock flapping his hands, a hideous bird of prey, the thief on the cross, with limbs contorted with agony, and so on. But there was nobody there with imagination enough or the inclination to enjoy the peep-show. For Micah was tracking down sin to its lair.

He tore sin limb from limb and exhibited it to the audience. He waved it before them from his lofty perch until the very atmosphere of the place seemed to stink of corruption. Then he set about his listeners and excoriated them for still wanting sin in spite of his efforts. Turn or burn. Repent for the day of judgment is at hand. He trotted it all out. He opened the very Pit itself right in the middle of the old billiard-hall until the stench of sulphur and the burning flesh of the damned seemed to rise and fill the chapel. The congregation by this time were cowering helplessly before his eloquence. He certainly could deliver the goods! Like Hitler, stupifying his listeners by

floods of hogwash. He finished them off properly, too. He talked of the judgment and of the doom of the unrepentent. The writing on the wall. Mene, mene, tekel upharsin!

Anybody with a grain of imagination and a knowledge of showmanship could see what was coming. Mr. Scewbody turned his back on his petrified audience and with a long shadowy forefinger wrote it on the wall! Then he sat down suddenly and the lights went up.

The congregation blinked but dared not look at each other. Mr. Scewbody seemed to have marked the forehead of each of them with the sign of guilt. He had provided the ingredients of the brew; all that was now required was the yeast to make it ferment. This was forthcoming in the form of another hymn of an interminable number of verses and with a frantic, despairing refrain. They sang it like savages whipping themselves up for an orgy, contorting themselves, stamping their feet, jerking their limbs, howling like dogs baying at the moon.

And then, like a witch-doctor, Mr. Whimbrel, tailor and outfitter and a deacon of the chapel, leapt forth to the front of the church and called sinners to repentance. Normally a quiet little man, Whimbrel was now beside himself, drunk with the wine of Scewbody, almost foaming at the mouth. He was not concerned with his own state of grace. He seemed to take that for granted. He was busy with others. "Are *you* on the Lord's side ...?"

"Have *you* been saved?" "Have *you* no sins to confess before the Throne?" And so on, and he pointed to this and that one as he asked his questions.

They took it seriously like members adhering to the rules of the game. As drunk as Mr. Whimbrel, they came to the front of the gathering confessed, and professed themselves saved. One, a baker, had been giving thirty-one ounces in a two-pound loaf. He would restore it tenfold, he promised in a frenzy of exultation. This one had made a false income tax return; declared thirty pounds instead of thirty-two! Another had been drunk many a night of late; he would sign the pledge.... Where was the pledge? Let him be getting at it with pen and ink! Others got on their sexual shortcomings. Some wept as they confessed them; others seemed to boast and repent in the same breath.... Mr. Scewbody's wine was strong stuff, for nobody seemed shocked at what was said. Only eager for more.

All this time the Rev. Micah sat with his head in his hands, as though praying that the floodgates he had opened might be closed again. Mr. Whimbrel, dancing in the excitement and ecstasy of his task, pointed a grubby forefinger here and there. “Are *you* ...?” “Have *you* ...?” Straight at Jane Prank!

At first the intoxicated gathering did not realise what she was talking about. She was standing by the side of Whimbrel, wild-eyed, loose-jawed, like one who sees a frightful vision and cannot fend it off. Words flowed. She didn’t seem to know what she was saying.

“I’m lost.... Nothin’ can undo what I done.... No redemption for me. I killed ’er. I give ’er the pills. Not *four* as Sam Prank said to do, Lord. I only give ’er three. It seemed too much to give ’er *four*; she’d been good to me many a time. So I give ’er three, Lord. I did it, though. Gave ’er the dose and left ’er to die. Stayed away from ’er when she was dying. And, if Sam did smother ’er with the cushion, it was me left ’er on the couch: ready for ’im to smother. An’ it was me give ’er the pills....”

A hush had fallen over the gathering, as though someone had flung cold water over the intoxicated celebrants. They stood open-mouthed, drinking in the strange tale pouring from Jane Prank’s lips. Scewbody had risen and hung over his desk, listening, like a great vulture awaiting the end. Whimbrel, his beard flecked with foam, stood helplessly before Jane, listening too.

It was as if the silence gradually brought to Jane Prank the realisation of what she had done. She halted, looked blankly at the gaping, tousled crowd before her and then, with a wild cry, fell upon Whimbrel, as though holding him responsible for all her trouble, and tore at his prominent Adam’s apple with her fingers.

The orgy of religion was ended. The feast fell flat. It was like the morning after the night before. They separated Jane from the terrified deacon who continued to flail the air defensively for some time after like a punch-drunk pugilist, and four men had to hold her until the police and a doctor arrived. Then came the ambulance and they packed her off to the county asylum. It was the only safe place for her.

XI

OUT GOES ANOTHER ONE

“WHERE exactly do we stand now in this case?” asked Hoggatt, vigorously scratching the hair at the back of his ear.

“Well, I think the confession and removal of Jane has cleared the air of an encumbrance. With Harriet and Sam getting themselves murdered almost simultaneously, we’d a bit too much on the agenda. Now that Harriet’s death is more or less cleared up, we can go ahead with Sam,” replied Littlejohn.

They were sitting in Hoggatt’s room at the police station and had just got rid of a number of deflated Bushers, who, the wind having been taken out of their sails by the sensational performance of Jane Prank, had been shepherded to the police station by the sergeant-in-charge and had constituted a crowd of witnesses giving testimonies concerning the course of events. It had been a scene like those beloved of the Old Masters. The numbering of the people at Bethlehem! Everybody told a different tale, of course. Instead of tallying with the lengthy and unctuous verbatim report given by the Rev. Micah Scewbody, who led them, they gave as many accounts as there were Bushers.

Roughly summarised, Jane Prank’s staggering outpouring made in chapel and in the asylum amounted to this: Sam Prank, knowing that Jane was burning to be free from her bondage to Harriet and wishing to get his own inheritance speedily, too, had craftily suggested an increase in the dose of digitalis. The old woman’s heart was bad, her life hung almost by a thread, and her sudden death would surely be certified by the doctor as from natural causes. Otherwise, she might live to a hundred and cheat them out of enjoying their dues. At last, after constant and cunning pestering by Sam, the distraught Jane had succumbed, but, in her overwrought state had tried to compromise with her conscience. She had only given half a lethal dose and then, instead of calling on an efficient and speedy neighbour for help, had caused delay in which to allow Harriet to die by asking the assistance of a couple she hardly expected to answer promptly on account of Mrs.

Dabchick's condition. Meanwhile, Sam had called and finished off the job. The heat of Mr. Scewbody's discourse, fanned by Mr. Whimbrel's third-degree had caused the pot to boil over....

The evening was sultry and from somewhere Hoggatt had produced bottles of beer, which he, Littlejohn and Cromwell were slowly consuming with great relish. It needed a lot to wash away the taste of the surfeit of Bushers....

Littlejohn pressed down the tobacco in his pipe with his middle finger and carefully re-lit it. Cromwell, too, who had taken to smoking a pipe, drew out a meerschaum—a present from his colleagues on the occasion of his marriage—from its case, approvingly surveyed the colour it was assuming and filled and lit it lovingly.

"Now where were we?" said Littlejohn. "Yes. Before we couldn't see wood for trees. Now the field is clearer. From the information you've gathered, Hoggatt, together with the results of my visit to Lee and Cromwell's to the *Bluebell*, the affair seems to boil down to this. Sam Prank was blackmailing someone. As far as we can gather, he'd got hold of letters or something and was putting the screw on the unknown victim....

"I suppose that's the murderer. Find the victim, find the man we're after," interjected Cromwell, and resumed his luxurious puffing.

"As likely as not. Sam had been getting himself into trouble with a girl he'd met on his travels. She happened to be married. So he'd to find a fair amount to hush it up. Rosie Lee lent him enough to tide matters over and then began to press for repayment. Presumably Sam in turn got hot on the track of *his* victim and, at the same time, set to work on Jane Prank with a view to hastening the time when he'd get his aunt's legacy, too. Sam's victim must have got desperate and struck hard to free himself...."

"So now what?" chimed in Hoggatt, who had been listening thoughtfully, his head on one side and his cigarette forgotten and burning away between his fingers.

"Cromwell found out from Sam's shipmates that he was likely to have left the blackmail letters in the hands of a friend ashore. That friend, we understand, would probably be Lee. That's our next job. We've got to see Lee again and force him into the open. He's as wily as a fox and wouldn't talk last time I saw him. Now that we know he's likely to have the letters,

however, we've a lever to use. Doubtless, if he does hold them, he'll try to cash-in himself. A bit of blackmail's probably quite up his street...."

"And how about the girl Sam Prank got into trouble?" added Hoggatt. "Mightn't it be that somebody connected with her called and took revenge on Sam Prank? Her brother, husband, father, might have got to the bottom of what had happened and sworn revenge."

"Yes. And that's a job for you to-morrow, Cromwell. Did you get to know where in South Redport Lee's spy found out about the affair?"

"No. I overlooked that...."

The sergeant stared hard into the bowl of his pipe. He didn't often miss anything. He could have kicked himself.

"All right, Cromwell. Don't worry. The *Bluebell*'s only coasting. We can find out from her owners where she puts-in and get the details by telephone. Hoggatt'll perhaps look after that. Get a message through and ask Tom Kitchen of the *Bluebell* to ring-up Werrymouth police as soon as they dock at wherever they're bound for. Ask him the name and address of the girl at South Redport that Sam Prank had been visiting and paying money. And tell him he'd better disclose everything or else he'll find himself on the wrong side of the law. We'll call on Mr. Lee to-night, however, and try to squeeze the information out of him to save trouble, but I've not much hope. He coughs himself almost unconscious when questions get near the danger line and manages somehow to evade the issue."

Hoggatt rose and stubbed out his cigarette.

"Well.... That's that. We see Rosie Lee again and try to get something out of him about the letters and who wrote 'em. We also get on the trail of the girl at South Redport.... Anything else?"

"That'll do for this sitting, Hoggatt," replied Littlejohn. "I admit we've not got very far yet. Let's hope Mr. Lee's a bit more communicative. You can leave this to us and I'll 'phone you if there are developments. We'll get off straight to our lodgings otherwise. It's getting late and we mustn't miss the last 'bus."

Cromwell carefully cleaned out his presentation pipe, polished the coloured bowl on his sleeve and tucked it snugly away in its case, patting the pocket to which he consigned it affectionately.

"Good night...."

It was dark outside. An offshore wind whistled down the hill on which the police station stood and teased the water of the docks, which lapped and flopped in the basins. In the distance, the boom of surf on the beach of the upper town.

A few dimmed lamps shone on the quay, mere matters of form, for nobody could find the way by them. The riding-lights of ships blinked and bobbed in the harbour and threw twisted reflections in the choppy water. Timbers creaked and groaned and ropes flapped in the breeze. Now and again one boat bumped another or beat the dockside with a dull thud.

There were a few loungers on the quay, mostly lovers cuddling in dark corners and shop doorways, or else sailors out for a binge, busy pub-crawling. From the quayside taverns emerged sounds of shouting, singing, cheering, quarrelling. Someone was vomiting noisily over the side of the docks. The man on the Halfpenny Bridge was sitting smoking in his cabin by the turnstile. He felt like playing truant and risking whether or not anybody wanted to take the short cut.

With the help of Cromwell's torch the two Scotland Yard men found Rosie Lee's shop. The shutters were up and the door fast. They hammered in vain. Not a sound from within. At length, their noise brought to the door of the adjacent shop, which sold canary and budgerigar food, dog biscuits, cuttle-fish and ferrets, a shuffling shadow of a man, whose height was alone distinguishable from the direction of his mouth and voice, and who timidly remained in the darkness of his doorway.

"No use knocking there. He's out," fluted the newcomer in a reedy voice. From somewhere in the blackness of the shop could be heard the squeaking and chirping of small live things the smell of which seemed to surround their unseen owner like a protective cloud.

"Did you see him go out?"

"Yes. About eight o'clock."

"What direction did he take?"

"Over the old bridge. I was standin' at the door 'avin' a smoke as 'e went out. I noticed it special on account of 'is not goin' out much.... Get in! Get in!"

The sudden exclamation was made to two cats which seemed to be rubbing round the trousers of the animal dealer. He seized them by the scruffs of their necks and deposited them behind him, where they began a

chorus of pathetic mewing. This interlude seemed to disturb the other occupants of the shop, which began to chatter and squeak and a parrot could be heard swearing like a trooper. The man closed the door the better to converse with his visitors.

“So Mr. Lee didn’t go out much?”

“’ardly at all. A little girl—distant relative of ’is, I understand—comes in the mornin’s and does a bit o’ shoppin’ fer ’im. And Mrs. Box, from behind here, tidies up fer ’im twice a week. Not that I takes much notice. Lee and me’s not on speakin’ terms, as yer might say. I usedter keep me ferrets and sich in hutches in the back yard and Lee said they stunk ’im out. Sent fer the sanitary inspector, he did, an’ made me shift the whole bloody lot ’ad to keep ’em in the cellar and the shop after that....”

“Very awkward, I’m sure. You’d have heard Lee if he’d come back, you think?”

“Certainly. The lock on ’is shop door’s an old spring one and he ’as to slam it like ’ell to get it to catch. Nearly knocks down the whole ruddy row of buildings when ’e locks up fer the night. No, ’e’s not come in, I tell yer.”

“Has he had any strange visitors of late, do you know?”

“Not as I’d notice. People come an’ go, you know. After all, that’s what you expect in a shop, mister, isn’t it? If there’s no comin’s and goings there’s no trade and if there’s no trade there’s the bankruptcy court.... Now, take me....”

Littlejohn, anxious not to be hearing the whole of the shadow’s business history, quickly interposed.

“We were round on Sunday afternoon and found Mr. Lee out, too. Did he make a habit of being out on closing day?”

The invisible man paused to light a fag-end. The glow of the match disclosed a thin consumptive-looking face, with high cheek-bones, a long, narrow, hooked nose and a ragged black moustache. Like an engraving of Don Quixote. The sudden flare of light illuminated the bulging eyeballs and tapering fingers with long dirty nails. He looked like a strange animal himself.

Don Quixote inhaled deeply from his cigarette.

“No. I never knew anybody who kept house like Rosie. Never stirred out o’ doors except on special occasions. Sat in ’is chair swillin’ beer most

o' the time and too lazy even to get up an' attend to the shop. Queer goin's on, if you ask me."

"Any idea where he went last Sunday afternoon, Mr.... Mr....?"

The name was over the shop window but was not legible in the darkness.

"Tinline's the name. Tobias Tinline.... Yes, I think I know where 'e went. But what d'yer want to know all this for? Not debt collectors or the bums, are yer?"

"No. We're police officers...."

Littlejohn thought he'd better tell Tinline and get it over with; it was cold on the quay and he had no wish to be invited indoors among the stench of the miniature menagerie.

"Wot's up? 'as Lee bin up to somethin', like?"

"No. A friend of his is in trouble and we really want to see Mr. Lee for a bit of help. But about last Sunday afternoon...."

"Oh, yes. I was just gettin' ready to take the dogs out for a walk round the houses, when I sees Lee passin' the window. Funny, I thinks to myself. Ain't seen you out for many a long day. Somethin' must 'ave 'appened to get you out o' doors. So, as I'm goin' the same direction, I 'urries up a bit and follers in 'is footsteps. Not that it was any of my business, I admits that, gents, but you know 'ow you are ... you know...."

"Yes, we know."

"Rosie didn't go far. Just round the corner and into the Samaritan."

"Off for a drink, was he?" muttered Cromwell in a voice hopeless with disappointment.

"No, no, no. The Samaritan's not a pub! It's the 'ospital. Big place as backs on the rear o' my premises, see? I saw Rosie go in by the front door and then bothered no more about 'im. One o' my dogs got in a fight and that put Rosie quite out o' my head."

"Well, well. Was he an out-patient, or something?"

"Search me. I'm not on speakin' terms, I told yer. It ain't likely Rosie'd tell me 'is troubles. Looked as if 'e wanted treatment o' some sort, I'll tell yer. Fat as a pig, soakin' up beer all day, and a face like Vesuvius in eruption...."

"Perhaps he was visiting somebody."

“Wot! Rosie? Don’t make me lawf. Turned sick visitor in ’is old age? Callin’ eatin’ other people’s grapes, wot?”

Instead of laughing however, Don Quixote burst into a series of quick-fire sneezes which convulsed him like a jerking marionette.

“Must get in. Catchin’ cold. Night air gettin’ on me chest.”

And with that, he hastily disappeared like a jack-in-the-box into the dark, noisesome shop.

Cromwell fumbled in his pocket and took out the large watch which his father had given him when he reached twenty-one and, producing the petrol-lighter which never lit the first time, managed to tell the time by the sparks from the flint.

“The last ’bus home has been gone more than ten minutes,” he muttered with studied resignation.

“Let’s get back to the police station, then, and see if one of the patrol cars is going in our direction,” answered Littlejohn.

Hoggatt almost cheered with relief when his two colleagues reappeared.

“Gosh! I’m relieved to see you back. Things have been happening since you went. We’ve got another stiff in the mortuary. Mister Rosie Lee!”

“What! We’ve just been on his track ourselves. What’s happened to him?”

“He was brought in just after you’d gone. He was found dead in the road just past the old bridge. Apparently he’d been walking back to town in the dark from somewhere and had been knocked down and killed by a car. The doctor said he hadn’t been dead more than half-an-hour when they found him....”

“You said *apparently*. I agree. If the doctor’s at work on him now, we’ll soon know the truth. In the circumstances, I don’t think it was an accident....”

As if to confirm Littlejohn’s views, the Mephistophelian face of Dr. Swann was thrust round the door.

“Hullo, Littlejohn.... Another body for you. Nasty bit of work this time. Died of a broken neck. Wheel of a car seems to have passed over the back of his neck and snapped it like a bit of twig. But there’s a lump on the back of the head which makes it seem that he was unconscious when he was killed. I’d say he was deliberately put in the road and then run over.... Mind

you, I won't swear to it until I've given him another thorough going-over; but that's my provisional report. The body was in dreadful shape. If he hadn't met a quick death, he'd have had a long and lingering mess of an end before long from natural causes!"

"Can we see the body, doctor?" asked Littlejohn.

"Certainly, if you can bear the sight of it. He looks pretty bad as a corpse. Bad enough when he was alive, but a hell of a sight worse dead. Come on...."

They entered the cold, gloomy morgue where the last of Mr. Rosie Lee was enduring the onsets of rigor mortis under a sheet.

There was nothing helpful in the pile of stuff the police had removed from the pockets. Thirty shillings in notes and change. A bunch of keys. A dirty handkerchief and some string. A knife and a corkscrew and the caps of two or three beer bottles....

Littlejohn bent and picked up a pair of boots with frayed laces knotted here and there where they had broken, and soles barely clinging to the uppers.

"These his boots?" he asked, inspecting the soles and then having picked up the dead man's knife, prodding in the angle where the heel meets the sole of one of them. Taking an envelope from his pocket he shook a portion of what he had loosened into it and showed it to Cromwell and Hoggatt.

"What is it?" said Hoggatt, sniffing it and turning up his nose.

"Pig dung," said Littlejohn. "Mr. Rosie Lee seems to have been out in the country. But had he walked far, that would have been dislodged from his boots. It looks as if he was laid out somewhere, brought in by car and put in the road near the town to make his death look like an accident...."

XII

THE PATIENT IN WARD 10

IT was in the small hours that Littlejohn and Cromwell arrived back at Playfair's cottage in a patrol car.

They had been assisting Hoggatt and his men to make a thorough search of the premises of the dead Mr. Lee. In the course of turning the whole place upside down in the hope of finding anything which might throw light on the Sam Prank affair, the police came across evidence of a number of shady and repulsive transactions, but no trace of anything whatever connected with the murdered seaman.

"It's ten to one that Lee had the letters, or whatever it was, in his pocket when he was killed and whoever did it took them away," grumbled Hoggatt.

The rest agreed. They were all disappointed at the fruitless quest. It was bad enough having to turn over the noisesome contents of Lee's unholy quarters, without drawing a blank for their pains. It was too far in the night to think of taking baths at once, but all the officers felt they would never be clean again....

Finally, before parting it was agreed that on the morrow Hoggatt's men should make enquiries on the Melcombe Road, which turns into Werrymouth over the river at the old bridge, and try to find out if anyone had seen Lee on his way to one of the farms nearby. Most of the farms kept pigs, of course, and, provided no trace of pig dung was found on the road for the dead man to have tramped through on his travels, it was safe to assume that he had been to some farm or other.

"And then, what?" muttered Hoggatt. "If we *do* find out that he's been to a farm, what good will it be? There are scores of farms in that direction."

"Perhaps we can link it up with something else," replied Littlejohn. "On Sunday afternoon, Lee visited the Samaritan Hospital, I hear. Now, we can assume he didn't do it out of the kindness of his heart. There must be somebody there he's got his claws in. To-morrow I'll call and try to get a line on that angle. Meanwhile, Cromwell is off to South Redport as soon as Tom Kitchin's information comes through....

“Sorry, I forgot to tell you. I got through to Dunstead just after you’d gone. The *Bluebell* put in there this evening. The police at the port managed to get hold of Tom right away. They must have shaken him up pretty badly. He gave them the address of the girl at South Redport without any trouble. It’s 29, Castle Hill....”

Cromwell made a note in his black book.

“Did they give any name?”

“Yes. Doris Pratt. I wonder if we’ll have any luck there. It’s a hell of a business trying to get to know anything about the private life of Sam Prank. We searched his lodgings.... He used to stay with Mrs. Pinner in Quay Street here; but we drew a blank. The place just looked like a vacant room in an hotel. Not a thing worth noting. A few books of the lurid kind, a change of suit and shoes, and little else. He certainly cleaned up his trail....”

Early the following morning Cromwell took a cross-country ’bus to South Redport and Littlejohn returned to Werrymouth to visit the hospital.

The Good Samaritan Infirmary is an old foundation situated in the oldest part of Werrymouth. Its main buildings tower above a motley assortment of annexes and lean-to constructions added to the place until not another yard of space was available. There is a scheme afoot to transfer the whole lot, lock, stock and barrel, to the country after the war.

The janitor told Littlejohn where to find the office.

On the way he passed the out-patients’ department where the usual crowd of sick and infirm were seated on benches like worshippers in a chapel. They spoke only in whispers, comparing notes and sympathising with one another. A nurse appeared and muttered a name and a woman rose to assist a man with a bandaged head....

Down the corridor two policemen were supporting a man who had fallen from his bicycle right outside the hospital. His trousers were torn and blood streamed from his nose.

“Take a seat,” said a fair girl in a white smock to Littlejohn and indicated a long wooden bench on which several others were awaiting attention. Opposite, in a room marked “X-Ray Department ” figures came and went. Two nurses in uniform, then a doctor in a white jacket followed by two men pushing a trolley on which was laid a smiling little man who might have been off for a joy ride. The door closed behind them and soon

hissing noises could be heard behind it as though someone were spasmodically deflating motor tyres.

“My wife’s here to have her breast off.... There was a lump.... The doctor said ...”

A small nervous man with a feeble straggling moustache was opening his heart to the Inspector. By his side, a little worn-looking woman trying to smile bravely. A battered suitcase between them.

“They said it would be all right. She’ll only be here a fortnight. I’m managing on my own. She’ll be all right here....”

And to confirm it, the small man thrust into Littlejohn’s hand a note from the Infirmary telling him to bring in the patient at such a time on such a day and then detailing toilet articles and items of clothing required.

“They do it properly, don’t they?”

“I’m sure she’ll be all right,” said Littlejohn.

It brought back the time when he himself took Letty to the nursing home to have her appendix out.

A nurse arrived and conducted the small man and his wife away. They turned to Littlejohn and smiled wanly, as though seeking a friend in the face of some form of torture.

“Good luck. She’ll be all right....”

“Yes.... Good luck to you, too. We hope you’ll come through all right as well.”

They had mistaken him for a patient, too. The little man trotted back and picked up the suitcase.

“I was forgetting this....”

“The secretary is free now,” said the receptionist.

Littlejohn was ushered into a small office crowded with filing-cabinets. A busy-looking grey-haired woman was sitting at a plain table.

Littlejohn stated what he wanted.

“Well, Inspector, you’ve rather set us a problem. We get so many visitors here. Sunday, you say? Perhaps the janitor will know.”

The secretary rang a bell and the elderly shuffling man who had admitted Littlejohn appeared.

“Lee? Yes, I remember him. Who wouldn’t, with his ugly mug? Called to see a patient in Ward 10....”

“Private Annexe?” said the secretary.

“Yes, Miss Hoskins. What ’e wanted I don’t know. Said he was visitin’ a friend.”

Littlejohn thanked the janitor, who shambled off.

“Now, Miss Hoskins, could you tell me about Ward 10, and who’s in it? Perhaps I might see whoever it is?”

“We’d better speak to Sister....”

The secretary pressed one of the buttons of a house telephone and spoke.

“She’ll be down in a moment....”

A good looking, apple-cheeked nurse, with a fringe of flaming red hair escaping from the front of her head-dress arrived. Littlejohn told her what he was after. She smiled wryly.

“Yes, I remember him. A very nasty-looking old man, but he said he just wanted a word with his friend. I don’t believe they were friends at all. I told him he couldn’t see the patient. I’m sure he was up to no good.”

“Who is the patient?”

“Mr. Boake....”

“Could I see him?”

“I’m afraid not, at present. He’s not been well since Sunday and Mr. Carper said he’d to have no more visitors for a bit.”

“Who’s Mr. Carper?”

The pretty Sister looked at him with a mixture of horror and pity.

“The surgeon. Everyone knows Mr. Carper”.

“Has Boake had an operation, then?”

“Yes. Perforated duodenal ulcer. He was getting along nicely until Sunday. Then he had a bad day. He’s improving again, now.”

“You’re sure I can’t have a word with him? I won’t be above a minute or two.”

The pretty nurse had a firm chin and a tight little mouth when occasion demanded.

“Not at present. Besides, the police might upset him more than ever. You might ask Mr. Carper when he comes this afternoon.... Or I could do so.... But ...”

“All right, Sister. I can wait. Thank you very much.”

“Now, Miss Hoskins,” said Littlejohn when the Sister had gone, “I wonder if we could find out all the people who’ve visited Mr. Boake since

he had his operation.... By the way, who is he?"

"Headmaster of St. Jude's School, in the town. Was taken suddenly ill in the night and rushed here only just in time, I believe."

"I see. I wonder what Lee wanted with him? Perhaps a list of his other visitors might assist us. Can you help?"

"I'm afraid not. You see, we don't keep a visitors' book. Mr. Boake is in a private ward on his own and the rules are relaxed on that wing somewhat. Callers may come any day, not just on special visiting days, as in the public wards."

"Would any of the nurses remember?"

"I doubt it. Visitors don't give their names. The nurse just shows them in and asks no questions, provided the patient's fit to see them."

"Since when has Mr. Boake been seeing people?"

The secretary rang through to the red-haired Sister on the intercom. again.

"Since last Thursday. His wife was allowed to see him after the operation on the Sunday-week before that. But nobody else until Thursday. He recovered very well until this little set-back."

"Thursday to Sunday isn't long. Perhaps some of the staff would remember callers."

"I think your salvation will lie in Fred, the janitor, again. He knows everybody in town and has a remarkable memory for faces. I suggest you ask him on your way out."

"Thanks for your help, Miss Hoskins, and now I'll be off and see Fred as you suggest."

Littlejohn found the janitor back in his cubby-hole by the main entrance. The place was stuffy and hot and barely large enough to hold two people.

Fred was glad to find somebody to talk to; especially when it was the police. He wanted to discuss the Werry-mouth murders from start to finish. He almost collapsed when Littlejohn told him that Rosie Lee was dead.

"There isn't much news I don't get 'old of, but that 'adn't come my way. Good riddance to a nasty bit o' work's what I say."

"He was here last Sunday ...?"

"Aye. An' up to no good, if you ask me."

"Visiting Mr. Boake?"

“Yes. And was shown the door for his pains. Nice gentleman, Mr. Boake. Very pleased we was able to pull ’im round after ’is sudden attack.”

The janitor talked as though he himself had operated in the nick of time.

“Has he had many visitors lately?”

“Wife started comin’ almost before ’e was out of the h’anesthetic. Then, later, others came. His wife’s very different from ’im. A long-faced, sour sort o’ woman, she is. Don’t know where ’e picked ’er up from. Not a native o’ these parts. What ’e saw in ’er I don’t know, ’owever, no accountin’ for tastes. ’Specially in love.”

“Can you remember who called besides Mrs. Boake?”

“Now, lemme see. Give me time and I’ll remember ’em. Got a good memory, I have. Not so many comes through those doors that I don’t remember. Mornin’, Dr. Postlethwaite....”

He was greeting the house surgeon who was just going out for a breath of fresh air.

“Now, there was Mrs. Boake....”

The doorman was laboriously intoning the list, his eyes turned heavenwards as though invoking inspiration or help in remembrance.

Littlejohn took out his note-book and jotted the names down.

“... then Mr. Podmore came. He’s the assistant headmaster at St. Jude’s. Doin’ temp’rary duty for Mr. Boake. Retired, was Mr. Podmore, but come back on account o’ the war. See? Then there was a deputation, as you might call it ... two boys from the school with some flowers. Yes, an’ the Director of Education himself was in. The Reverend Cornwallis, of the Methodists—very decent chap he is, too—called on behalf of the church where Boake goes, an’ later two o’ the deacons arrived, too.”

“Who were they?”

“Mr. h’Alderman Coop an’ Mr. Watkinson, the bank manager.”

Littlejohn noted them all down.

“Anybody else?”

“Plenty of inquiries, but they all didn’t want to see Mr. Boake, of course.... Who else went in to ’im? Oh yes. One or two of ’is old scholars. Funny how they should turn up. There was Nancy Emmott, from Headlands....”

“Where’s that?”

“Headlands Farm, just outside the town.”

“Yes. A friend of Mr. Boake’s, eh?”

“Old pupil, I said, didn’t I? Drove in with ’er brother in the van. I saw ’em there, in front of the ’ospital, and ’ad to tell ’em to move the van round the corner. No parkin’ in front of the ’ospital, I tells ’em.”

“Yes?”

“Well. Nancy arrived with a big bunch o’ flowers and they tuck ’er up to see Mr. Boake. In a bit, she comes down and says Boake wants to see ’er brother. So out she goes and sends up George.”

“When would that be?”

“Last Saturday morning.”

“Were they the first except Mrs. Boake?”

“No. Several before them.... Wait. There was another, too. An old scholar called on Friday. ’is ship ’ad just docked and havin’ heard of his old schoolmaster’s illness, ’e calls to see ’im. Ministerin’ to the sick. I don’t think. Scroungin’. That’s what it was. Scroungin’ for what ’e could get....”

Littlejohn had difficulty in making himself heard above this spate of abuse.

“Who was it?” he asked, but he knew the answer before it came.

“Bloke called Sam Prank,” replied the janitor, smiling knowingly to himself and pleased with his dramatic effort in preserving the climax until the end.

XIII

ST. JUDE'S SCHOOL

AFTER his visit to the Good Samaritan Littlejohn paused to consider his next move.

The patient in Ward 10 was obviously connected with Sam Prank, albeit remotely, and hence probably with the crime. Yet, in his serious condition, Mr. Boake could hardly have left the hospital and attacked the sailor on the previous Saturday night. A fortnight after a laparotomy operation was no time for venturing on the quayside.

All the same, further background concerning the schoolmaster and his connection with Sam Prank must be sought at once. From Mrs. Boake herself? She had a reputation for being an awkward woman, to say the least of it, and it might be that if, as was likely, Sam had been trading on some seamy side of Mr. Boake's history, his wife would be quite in the dark.

Who else was there? Littlejohn remembered that a Mr. Podmore, who was acting as temporary head of St. Jude's during Boake's illness, had already been to the hospital to see the sick man. Perhaps he would be of greater help.

The Inspector therefore made enquiries concerning the location of the school and set out to find it. It did not take him long. The school is an old one and the gaunt, two-storeyed pile of buildings turned out to be within a few hundred yards of the police station.

The main entrance fronted straight on to the street. Asphalted playgrounds surrounded by low walls topped with spiked railings on either side of the building. A monitor asked Littlejohn his business as soon as he entered by the swing-doors and pointed the way to a room where Mr. Podmore was taking a large class of boys.

There was a great hush along the corridors, punctuated by the voices of teachers pumping knowledge into students. In the distance, a dull rumble of scholars reciting monotonously and in unison. As Littlejohn drew nearer, he recognised the words of the drone and smiled to himself as he remembered

himself as a unit in a similar performance ten, twenty, thirty ... how many years ago was it?

“Horatius,” quoth the Consul,
“As thou sayest, so let it be.”
And straight against that great array
Forth went the dauntless Three.
For Roman’s in Rome’s quarrel
Spared neither land nor gold,
Nor son nor wife, nor limb nor life,
In the brave days of old....

Mr. Arnold Podmore reminded Littlejohn of a spinning-top. He heard him before he saw him, though.

“You ... and you ... and you ... Out you come.... Into the front of the class. My stars, I’ll make you bounce!”

Through the glass panels of the door, Littlejohn saw the eternal comedy of school days being enacted. Three hulking boys detached themselves from the main body, slowly, as though anticipating what was in store at the end of the journey, and made their ways to the front of the room. When they arrived there, they received three ringing blows apiece on the head from a ruler which would have rendered feebler specimens unconscious on the spot. The spinning-top was in a rare temper and was making his students sit up!

“My word, I’ll make you bounce! By gad, I’ll dust your trousers!” he yelled at his victims, each of whom was much bigger than his tormentor. They towered above Mr. Podmore like great hounds terrified by a snapping terrier or lions cowed by the unflinching eye of a diminutive tamer.

Littlejohn picked up another wandering pupil and asked to be shown to Mr. Podmore. He watched his messenger approach the teacher like a suppliant begging a boon of a tyrant and not knowing whether it would be granted or he’d have his eyes gouged out for the asking. Podmore spun and faced the awed youngster, snatched Littlejohn’s card impatiently, read it and barked a question. The boy pointed to Littlejohn on the other side of the door. Mr. Podmore slapped down the boy’s finger, for it was rude to point, flapped a friendly hand at the Inspector and with short rapid steps hurried to join him.

“Afternoon, Inspector,” he said. He had a large bald head with two tufts of grey hair like rudimentary wings, over his ears. His nose was snub and a mellow red; his well-tended grey moustache resembled an aeroplane propeller. His body was small and round and his feet were so tiny that he seemed to taper-off to a point as though created to rotate on his axis rather than walk.

“We’ll go to my private room, sir. Come along,” said the teetotum affably and then his genial round face suddenly straightening and becoming contorted into a malevolent mask, he turned back and shouted through the open door.

“And let me so much as hear a pin drop in this room while I’m away and I’ll make somebody unable to sit down for a week....”

Forty boys sat there with petrified faces, trying to look models of virtue. They adored “Poddy,” created legends about him to tell to their companions who hadn’t the luck and honour to sit under him, and returned from the ends of the earth in later life to pay him respects when freed by time from his tyrannies.

The Inspector followed his companion to a small office, the walls of which were covered in book-shelves containing what looked like stocks of text-books, for the titles were repeated *ad infinitum*. There were, too, on the window sills, on tables, on a large desk and overflowing to the ground, exercise books and papers awaiting marking. A small table by the door held a motley lot of marbles, penknives, pencils, catapults, water-pistols, sweets and other objects dear to the hearts of boys and obviously confiscated for distracting their owners from Poddy’s discourses. It only needed a label, “Anything in this lot twopence” to complete the picture.

“We’re in a bit of a mess here, Inspector,” apologised the schoolmaster, clearing two chairs of encumbrances. “Please be seated. Mr. Boake’s sudden illness has thrown us into confusion.”

Littlejohn sat down like a new entrant being put through his preliminary paces.

“My reason for calling, sir,” Littlejohn began, “is to enquire if anyone has recently been pestering Mr. Boake or visiting him under unusual circumstances. Can you help me in any way?”

“What do you mean?” snapped Podmore. “Boake is a dear fellow and I cannot see why, when he is unfit to attend to his own affairs, the police

should be investigating them....”

“Now, now, Mr. Podmore. You’re not talking to a schoolboy now. I’m a police officer pursuing a perfectly legitimate enquiry. We have reason to believe that during his illness a certain person has been worrying Mr. Boake. I’m here to find out how long this has been going on....”

“I’m sorry, Inspector. I get so used to biting-off pupils’ heads when they get me rattled that I forgot my manners. Go on....”

“Can you answer my question then, sir?”

Mr. Podmore twirled his pomaded moustache and then flung out his small, well-kept hands in a hopeless gesture.

“I can’t,” he said simply. “My classroom is remote from this office and I don’t see people come and go as they visit the Head. I’ll tell you what, however. The monitor on duty at the class near the main door is instructed to keep an eye on callers and see that they receive proper attention. Just excuse me a moment ...”

The schoolmaster made a bounding exit on small, brisk feet to return a minute or two later followed by three older boys who filed deferentially after him and lined-up, fidgeting, for interrogation.

“Now, boys ... Oh, stand at ease ... stand at ease! You’re not on parade. Be natural ... be natural!”

The students eased up and relaxed to the best of their ability, but it was a poor effort, for they seemed to expect at any time that Poddy would pounce on them and crack their pates.

“This is Inspector Littlejohn, of Scotland Yard, and he’s here for our help in connection with a scoundrel who’s been worrying....”

Littlejohn though it was time to intervene before Podmore in his excitement invented some cock-and-bull story which would fly round the town like wildfire.

“.... I believe a certain person has been going round the town pestering people and I wonder if he’s ever tried Mr. Boake. Can any of you tell me whether or not he has had any unusual callers during the past weeks?”

The eyes of the trio sparkled when the first shock of the meeting had worn off. At last they had been blest by being granted the desire of every reader of juvenile blood-and-thunder. They had been asked to collaborate with Scotland Yard! They assumed the intent, strained attitudes of runners awaiting the starting-pistol.

Mr. Podmore was evidently opt for quick results.

“Come, come!” he chattered. “You, and you, and you ... you were on monitorial duty during the past three weeks. Did anyone strange arrive here over that period? Cudgel your brains and memories to remember *all* who came whilst you were on duty. The Inspector wants to know all about it, boys. Nothing is too trivial. Don’t be reticent or shy. Well, Schofield? You were on duty, weren’t you? What have you to say? Speak up, lad.... Don’t shuffle and mumble....”

Young Schofield was tall, lanky and anaemic and his arms and legs had left his coat-cuffs and trouser-bottoms far behind. His front teeth were bound together by a brace of silver wire.

“I ccccan’t remember who ccccalled egggsackly, sir,” he stammered through his dental obstruction.

“Try again! Try again! Cudgel what brains you’ve got, Schofield. They aren’t many, I grant you, but cudgel ’em,” roared Poddy and his neck began to swell with annoyance like a motor tyre being inflated.

The poor lad screwed-up his face in a dreadful contortion intended to depict intense concentration.

“I ccccan only remember the st-st-stationery travellers and ttttwo A.R.P. wardens coming ... yes ... and Hazlitt’s mother callin’ bbbbecause her Johnny ’ad got a job and wanted a test-testim-testim ...”

“TESTIMONIAL!!!” hollared Poddy at the end of his tether. “How did you know she wanted a testimonial, Schofield? Answer me! You were eavesdropping, Schofield ...”

Littlejohn thought it high time to call-off the third-degree.

“Look here, Schofield,” he said. “You know where the borough police station is. Now I want you to think, when you’re quiet and have a minute to spare, exactly who called on Mr. Boake during the week before he stayed away from school. Put a list on paper and when you’ve got them all down, come to the police station and ask for me. If I’m not in, leave the paper for me. That clear?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the over-awed youngster, straightening his back with pride and in anticipation of the great events to come. His two companions, hitherto speechless, opened their mouths in wonder at the boon which had been bestowed on Schöey, as they called him.

One boy had no top teeth at all in front and wore owlish spectacles to correct an obvious squint, which manifest itself to a painful degree whenever he grew excited. The other was a bright, apple-cheeked lad, who looked to have polished his face with furniture cream and plastered down his fair hair with margarine.

Instinctively the last named lad raised his hand to Mr. Podmore as though still in class. Then, remembering where he was, he turned to Schofield.

“Tell ’im abaht the feller in the sailor’s jersey,” he said brightly.

Mr. Podmore winced at the language of this youth, an evacuated Cockney, but a monitor none the less!

Schofield’s troubled face grew suddenly bright.

“I got it. Yes, a bloke.... I mean, a man ... called to see Mr. Boake the week before he was took ill. He’s the only stranger I remember. Walked in at the door and asked for Mr. Boake. Said he was an old pupil of ’is. So I tuck ’im to ’im.”

Never a stutter or a splutter in his excitement!

“Well ... WELL! yelled Podmore. “What else? Who was he? What was he?”

Schofield made movements of his mouth as though trying to uproot and eject the dental brace, but seemed again devoid of words.

“What kind of man was he, do you say?” asked Littlejohn, very excited himself, but showing no trace of it. He put his arm through that of the agitated Schofield to calm him down a bit.

“Wore a sailor jersey and cloth cap. Tall chap ... bit on the thin side....”

“Anything more?”

“No, sir. ’e didn’t give no name....”

“Any name ... *any* name, Schofield,” angrily corrected the spinning-top.

“You don’t by any chance know what he wanted, Schofield?”

“No, sir. But I remember after I’d tuck ’im to Mr. Boake, I passed Bentley going to Mr. Boake’s room as I was going back to class....”

“Spivey! Go and get Bentley quickly, my lad, and don’t be all day about it,” barked Podmore, and Spivey of the polished cheeks tore off like the shot from a gun. He returned accompanied by a hulking good-humoured youth, self-possessed, grinning and ready for anything.

Poddy set about him right away.

“Take that grin from your face, Bentley. This is serious business, not a pantomime. Now we have with us Inspector Littlejohn of Scotland Yard, and he’s a question to ask you. See you answer him promptly and clearly....”

“Schofield tells me, Bentley, that you came to Mr. Boake’s room the other day and found a visitor here ... a sailor, is that true?”

“Yessir Smokin’ a pipe and talkin’ about some letters he wanted Mr. Boake to buy off him....”

“How do you know that, Bentley?” asked Littlejohn, surprised.

“I overheard what they were sayin’, sir, because I stood outside the door waiting for the chap to go.”

“What were you waiting for?” quacked Podmore.

“The cane, sir. Mr. Holloway sent me to report myself for impudence.” Littlejohn hid a grin.

“And what did you overhear, Bentley?” continued the Inspector.

“They were talkin’ about letters or somethin’, and the sailor ... it was Sam Prank, I know ’im well, he courted my sister for a bit till she found somebody better. Sam Prank was saying that it would pay Mr. Boake to give ’im what he wanted for the letters. Said it wouldn’t do at all for Mrs. Boake to get ’em....”

“Dear me!” muttered Podmore twirling his moustache. “Very distressing. What did Mr. Boake say, my boy?”

“He says he’s astonished that an old pupil of ’is should come with such a disgraceful proposal.... If he was in money trouble Mr. Boake ’ud help ’im, if he could. But to come at him like that ... like ...”

“I understand, Bentley.... Go on,” said Littlejohn. “How did it end?”

“Sam Prank mentioned a sum of money. I forgot what it was, if ever I knew it.... Any way, Mr. Boake said it was ridiculous and tells ’im he can’t answer right away. He’ll think it over....”

“Did it end there?”

“Nearly. Sam Prank said it wouldn’t pay ’im to tell the police, because Mrs. Boake ’ud know of it even if he went to jail. Said he was off on a short trip and due back shortly. He’d call agen for the money and if it wasn’t ready for ’im, he’d post off the stuff to Mrs. Boake by registered letter before he sailed....”

Podmore and Littlejohn exchanged glances. Young Bentley had overheard the unsavoury details of what appeared to be a first-class scandal, but he seemed to have no idea that he was washing dirty linen.

“Was that all?”

“Mr. Boake flew into a temper and said ‘good mornin’,’ and Sam Prank went at that. As he went he turned and told Mr. Boake he’d better think it over and be sensible, like, if he knew what was good for ’im. Then, Mr. Boake sees me and he’s so bothered at what Sam Prank said that he doesn’t cane me at all. Sends me back and tells me not to be childish...”

There was a pause.

“Anything more, Bentley?” said Littlejohn finally. “What you’ve told me is very useful...”

“Yes,” interjected Podmore. “Very interesting but the narrative was not much credit to the training you’ve had here, Bentley. Grammar, style and diction disgraceful ...”

And then with a flashing eye and brow of thunder, Mr. Podmore seemed suddenly to boil up in rage.

“And let me hear of any one of you repeating anything that has been said in this room and he’ll regret the day he was born!”

The boys shivered in their shoes, shuffled and tried to look quite incapable of such perfidy.

“I’m very grateful, boys, for your help and please remember what Mr. Podmore’s told you.”

The boys nodded and made noises indicating their thorough understanding of what had been said to them.

“And now you may go ... And remember ... no chattering to the other boys.”

They departed headed by the lad with no top teeth, who hadn’t spoken a word from start to finish.

“You must forgive my abruptness with the boys, Inspector,” chuckled Podmore, when they were out of earshot. “One has to be firm. Best thing for all of ’em. Discipline ... and they like a schoolmaster all the better for being strict. Well, I hope the visit’s done you a lot of good. Personally, I feel very distressed. I wonder what that scoundrel Sam Prank has been at with his letters. Young Bentley’s tale sounds to be straight from a penny

dreadful. Yet, he seemed so convincing and it all came out pat, didn't it? I really don't know what to think of it all."

They made for the outer door.

"I'm sorry to have taken so much of your time, sir," said Littlejohn as they shook hands near the little man's classroom, which was hushed owing to scouts having warned the rest of Podmore's imminence.

A paper aeroplane slowly floated through the open door and landed almost at Peg-top's feet. He bent and examined it.

"Constructed by Williams, I think. I recognise his handiwork as you Scotland Yard men would that of a burglar. Well, goodbye Inspector."

The schoolmaster smiled benignly at his visitor and then, as Littlejohn turned to go, Poddy changed from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. His face assumed a most hideous and ferocious expression, all the smiles and good cheer departed from it and with the light of fixed purpose in his eyes, he spun into the classroom.

"WILLIAMS!" he yelled, and through the glass partition a huge form could be seen uncurling itself from a desk and emerging with great reluctance to the front of the class.

The last Littlejohn heard was a terrific bastinado, like the sound of a number of wooden balls fired rapidly at a coconut, which the Podmorian code seemed to lay down for every offence.

XIV

EMMOTTS' FARM

“W_{HAT} do you want?”

A tiny, shrivelled, plain looking farm servant with a large hairy mole on her chin addressed the Inspector aggressively. She had apparently been feeding the pigs, for she carried in her hands an empty bucket which emitted a strong smell of swill. Flies were buzzing round and she beat them off irritably from time to time.

Littlejohn had decided that he had best visit Headlands Farm, where lived the pair, brother and sister, who had called on Boake in hospital recently. Probably it had only been a courtesy call, but the evidence on Lee's boots that he had been at a farm just before his death, had stimulated Littlejohn's curiosity.

The farm was about ten minutes walk from the Halfpenny Bridge. By paying toll instead of going round by the old stone free-bridge, you saved half-an-hour.

The Emmotts had farmed Headlands for over four hundred years. Yeomen, owning two hundred acres and a very proud and careful lot they were reputed to be, too. All except Nancy. She was said by some people to be not quite “all there.” Others would have it she was as clever as the rest of the family, but inherited her mother's sweetness of disposition. At any rate, she had not married at nearly thirty, in spite of the fact that she was a beauty. They said her brother drove all the men away. Nobody was good enough for Nancy and the Emmott inheritance, according to George. George wasn't married either, although he was thirty-four. He was hard to please on that count. He was taking his time choosing the girl who would, when the old man died, be mistress of Headlands. A well-knit, stand-offish family, the Emmotts.

There was nobody about the farmyard when Littlejohn arrived. The low-set stone house, like a small manor, stood back from the road, with a well-kept flower garden between the front door and the passing traffic. At the side of the house, a large gate let in a high wall gave into the farmyard.

This was a rectangle of stables, barns and cowsheds. Electric cables criss-crossed overhead, connecting various buildings. The place seemed very modern and trim. Red-tiled roofs, well-tended outbuildings, absence of rubbish and litter. The whole outfit showed no lack of working capital. No scratching for a living here; the stamp of prosperity and efficiency was upon it.

A bobtail sheep-dog, chained near the gate, rushed from his kennel and barked frantically. The determined-looking maid emerged from some pig-styes.

“What do you want?”

“Is Miss Emmott at home?”

“She’s somewhere about.... In the dairy, I think. Who shall I say?”

“Inspector Littlejohn....”

“Police, eh? Been exceeding their milk quotas again. I told ’em what it would be....”

“Will you tell Miss Emmott I’d like a word with her, please?”

The woman waddled off, but was soon back.

“Will you come in?”

She led him through a long passage from the back door to the front of the house and ushered him into what seemed to be a formal drawing-room reserved for special occasions.

“Give me your hat and coat. I’ll hang ’em just here. Miss Nancy’ll only be a minute.”

The maidservant put the Inspector’s hat and raincoat on one of a series of hooks in the passage and he laid his stick on a chair nearby. He might have been coming for a long stay the fuss that was made.

The room smelt musty, as though short of sunshine or a good fire now and then, and the small leaded windows added to the sombre gloom. The furniture was old-fashioned, but elegant. Mahogany sideboard, corner cupboard, Chippendale chairs and table.... The sort to get a collector or antique dealer excited. A harmonium with a book of hymn tunes and a number of beginners’ pieces littering the top of it. On the wall, a case of books. Family Bible, Pilgrim’s Progress, Baxter’s Saints’ Everlasting Rest and a lot more like it. Culpepper’s Herbal and a battery of handbooks on stock-rearing and veterinary medicine. Hanging round, a number of family portraits and framed reproductions of masterpieces from Christmas

almanacs, surrounded by fussy little frames containing coloured diplomas commemorating special, first or second prizes for fat cattle, pigs and horses at agricultural shows.

The door opened and a woman entered. Her appearance was quite up to the description Littlejohn had received of her locally. In fact, more so. She was between twenty and thirty, he had been told. Unmarried, yet the sort to choose just whom she wanted and turn a lot of other men's heads in the process.

A refined-looking oval face, with an almost exotic milk-and-roses complexion. A faint smile, and no artifice or subtlety about her. She was tall and slim-hipped with a round sensuousness about her figure.

What caught the attention first, however, was the innocent, expressionless china-blue eyes with slightly reddened rims and the flaxen hair, brushed back from a good forehead and gathered in a knot at the nape of the neck. She had an air of childish immaturity about her. Perhaps those who said she was a bit simple were right.... Or, on the other hand, a gentle spirit dominated by the masterful males of the family and protected like a precious thing might produce the same effects. It was a new experience to encounter such a type in modern times.

Nancy Emmott wore a tweed skirt and a simple Russian jumper stitched with coloured wools.

"Did you want to see my father ... or my brother?" The voice was soft and pleasing. She looked at Littlejohn with clear eyes, expressionless in that the look was far away, as though she saw right through him.

"No. I wanted a word with you first, Miss Emmott."

"I'm sorry you had to wait. I was busy in the dairy."

"That's all right. I won't keep you a minute. It's about Mr. Boake. You paid him a visit at the hospital the other day, didn't you?"

"Yes.... Won't you please sit down?"

The girl looked puzzled and a bit embarrassed. She passed her hand across her brow like someone bothered by a difficult problem, though here there was none. She was evidently wondering why a sick visit should concern the police.

"Mr. Boake isn't fit to see visitors at present ... At least, not the police. He interests us in that Sam Prank, the sailor who was recently murdered in

the town, visited him not long before his death. We wondered if, when you called, Mr. Boake said anything about that visit.”

“No, Inspector. I called with some flowers. Mr. Boake is a good friend of ours. In fact, he spent quite a lot of time here. He loved to talk with father and ...”

Nancy Emmott’s colour had mounted. She seemed to be fumbling for a satisfactory explanation.

“... and with you, Miss Emmott?”

“Well, I was one of his old pupils at St. Jude’s. He’s always been kind to me.... He had no children of his own....”

“And wasn’t very happy at home?”

“Well. What of it? He had a right to seek his happiness elsewhere, then.”

The girl was getting a bit heated.

“Of course, Miss Emmott. So Mr. Boake didn’t mention Sam Prank’s visit then?”

“No.”

“Did he ask you to send up your brother as you left him?”

“Yes. He asked where George was. I said minding the van down in the street. He said he’d like to see him, too. So I went down and sent George up.”

“Was George with Mr. Boake for long?”

“About five minutes, I’d say. They wouldn’t let us stay for more than a few minutes. But what has this to do with ...?”

“You knew Sam Prank, Miss Emmott?”

The girl instinctively recoiled as from something fearful and then recovered herself.

“Very well. He was at school when I was.”

“He was by way of being an admirer of yours?”

Littlejohn thought that he had a bit of a nerve asking such a question. But if Sam, the Lothario, had known this girl, it was ten to one that he had at some time or other made advances. Sure enough, he had.

“Yes.... He ... he ... called here a time or two. My brother told him to keep off or else ...”

So the cheeky Sam had brought the war right into the enemies’ camp.... Tried to carry Nancy off under the very noses of the family. Just like him!

Littlejohn was beginning to know Sam very well.

Littlejohn observed that the girl was distressed, apparently fighting back tears and screwing her handkerchief nervously in her fingers. He changed the subject at once.

“When did Mr. Boake first start coming here? I mean, has he always visited you when he’s wanted a change of company ... Or has he recently started ...?”

“Five or six years, I should think. He often came twice a week. Sometimes more. My father has been an invalid for many years. He had an accident which paralysed his legs. We hoped he’d recover, but he hasn’t. Mr. Boake and he were great friends....”

“I see. Could I see your father before I go, Miss Emmott? I’d like a word with your brother, too....”

“George should be back any time. He’s over at a neighbour’s. They’re discussing some business for the County Agricultural Committee....”

“Thanks for what you’ve told me, Miss Emmott. And your father?”

“Oh yes. I’ll take you to him. He’s reading his papers in the kitchen. He likes best to be there....”

Littlejohn followed Nancy through the passage again to the back of the house.

The kitchen was a large, lofty place with tall windows. It was much cooler there. In the centre a large plain deal table, well scrubbed and laid for lunch for seven. A cloth with blue and white squares, good cutlery and household china. Probably all the hands fed there. Matting on the red tiled floor and an assortment of chairs tucked under the table. A great open fireplace, with a large oven on one side and a set-boiler with a brass tap on the other. A pleasant airy room. No wonder the old man preferred it.

Old Emmott was seated in a deep armchair before the wood fire. He raised his head from his newspaper and peered round the wing of the chair at the newcorners.

A handsome old fellow, with a pink healthy face and a head of shining white hair like silk. An excellent profile. Firm chin and fine nose with a lofty bridge. The dark eyes, a trifle close-set on each side of it were full of good will and vivacity.

From the waist downwards Saul Emmott was wrapped up in a travelling rug.

Nancy introduced the pair. The old man glanced inquisitively at Littlejohn. He could not go out for news himself and eagerly appreciated its coming to him.

“And what do the police want at Headlands?” he asked. “Not more regulations broken, I hope. Really, Inspector, we’re so hidebound with this and that...”

“No, father. Inspector Littlejohn comes from Scotland Yard. He’s investigating the death of Sam Prank.”

The old man’s brow clouded. His look grew almost malevolent.

“What has that to do with us?” he asked ominously. “A bad end to a bad man. With the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked, as the Good Book says. What has he to do with my house, I say?”

“Nothing directly, Mr. Emmott. Not long before his death, however, Prank called on Mr. Boake at the hospital. And shortly afterwards, your son and daughter also visited Boake. I was just enquiring from Miss Emmott whether or not Mr. Boake mentioned Prank and what he was after.”

“What is this, Nancy?” said the old man sternly, turning his head and fixing his daughter with a keen glance. The girl was again struggling with emotion. She uttered a sound like a sob and then, recovering herself, spoke.

“Nothing at all father. You know we called on Mr. Boake with your compliments and some flowers....”

“Yes, yes. But Prank. What’s all this about Prank?”

“Nothing, father. He wasn’t mentioned.”

“I’m glad to hear it. That disposes of that point, then. Is there anything more, Inspector? Because if there isn’t maybe you’ll have a glass of our cider and talk of other things.”

The old man was smiling, serene and peaceful again. You knew at once from the look of him he had lived a full life, experienced perhaps all there was to experience, and that he wasn’t afraid of anything that might come.

Littlejohn lit his pipe as the maid fetched the drinks.

“Your health, Inspector.”

Littlejohn smacked his lips and nodded approvingly at the cider.

“Your own?” he asked.

“No,” said the old man. “We don’t grow good cider apples in these parts. We get it up from a cousin of mine in Hereford.”

“You and Mr. Boake were great friends, I hear.”

“Yes. He came a lot. Used to like to sit here, me on one side of the fire; him on the other. We’d smoke our pipes all night and he’d bring me the news. Then we’d talk about it and solve the world’s problems.... I hope he’ll soon be fit and back again. He’s better, I hear.”

“So I believe.”

So that was it. In his mind’s eye Littlejohn could imagine Boake. Nagged by his wife and unhappy at home, he’d put on his hat and come to Headlands Farm. A quiet world apart. And there, Boake and the old man would smoke their pipes and sit quietly talking about things and perhaps sometimes say nothing at all, just enjoying each other’s company. The disillusioned schoolmaster and the peaceful old man.

The maid was beginning to bustle round with the lunch dishes. She laid seven tumblers beside the seven knives and forks and opened the large oven to see how the joint was doing. She basted the meat, inspected a large rice pudding and turned over the baking potatoes. Then, she closed the door and went off. It was all done without fuss. Littlejohn himself felt he could stay there indefinitely, absorbing the peace of the place and talking to the old man....

Nancy Emmott, who had been absent for a bit, returned with a stack of plates which she put to warm over the oven....

“Did you know a man called Lee? A newsagent and general dealer in the town?”

The plates rattled in Nancy’s hand. She steadied herself against the top of the oven and then seemed to be herself again.

Littlejohn was reluctant to ask it, but it had to be done. After all, Lee had been to some farm or other on this road. The mention of his name and the unpleasant associations connected with it were almost like brawling in church. The serene atmosphere of Headlands kitchen didn’t merit it.

“Lee?” The old man murmured the name distastefully. “Yes. He called here from time to time. Indeed, I think he was here the night he was knocked down and killed. Wasn’t he, Nancy?”

“Yes, father.” Her voice came almost in a whisper.

“Used to call on all the farmers round here for eggs, fowl and such like, if there were any to spare. I think he ran a little black-market of his own in the town. We gave him short shrift, but he persevered. Kept calling. Didn’t he, Nancy?”

“Yes, father.”

“And did you notice anything unusual about him on the night before he died, Mr. Emmott?”

“I didn’t see him. Nancy said he’d been here. She and George saw him.... Did you ask him in, Nancy?”

“No. He stood at the door talking with George. I left them. He was such a dreadful man. He went away and we hadn’t given him anything.”

“I see....”

Outside a car had drawn up in the yard. It was an old four-seater, a tourer, open to the winds, with shabby mica side curtains opaque with wear and time. A tall, lean well-knit man was scrambling out. He was about Littlejohn’s size, but not as straight in the shoulders. His footsteps could be heard entering the house and clinking their way to the kitchen.

“Hullo, George....”

“Well, George. Have a good meeting, my boy?”

His two relatives greeted him with interest.

“Hullo....”

It was young Emmott returned from his confab with the Agricultural Committee. He wore a coat of dark tweed and tan riding-breeches, with leggings and heavy nailed boots. He was standing waiting for them to introduce him to the visitor.

“This is Inspector Littlejohn, who’s investigating Sam Prank’s murder, George. This is my brother....”

George scowled and offered a limp hand, not that his grip was naturally feeble, but the greeting was given grudgingly.

Young Emmott resembled his father, but his face was leaner and his dark eyes nearer the nose. What in the father was hardly noticeable was, in the son, a definite blemish, a shortcoming which marred his looks and gave a sinister twist to his features. The serenity of the old man was lacking, too. George was in his prime and looked headstrong and passionate. You got the impression of a steam-engine without a safety-valve. Pent-up with no outlet. His hair, too, grew differently from his father’s. Closely cropped, *en brosse*, it gave him a wild expression, a mild reminder of those Legros etchings in which horrified men discover unspeakable things.

“Have they arrested anybody?”

“No. We’re baffled at present. You see, it was done in the dark and Prank seemed to have enemies everywhere.”

“He was a bad lot.”

George spat it out like getting rid of something unpleasant and cast at his sister a strange vindictive look which Littlejohn failed to understand.

“I’ve been telling your father and sister that he visited Mr. Boake shortly before his death. The doctors won’t allow me to interview Mr. Boake, so I’m scouting around to find, if I can, whether Mr. Boake mentioned to anyone what occurred when Prank was with him. Surely Prank wasn’t sick-visiting. There was something more than that in it.”

George Emmott’s eyes were fixed on a wasp crawling up and down the window-pane.

“He said nothing to me when I was there,” he replied absently.

“Your sister says he specially sent for you. I wondered if he wanted you to do something for him.”

“Here! What’s all this about. When Nancy went to see him, he asked if I’d come, too. She said yes. So he wanted to see me, as well. We’re old friends. There’s nothing extraordinary in that, is there?”

An uneasy element was beginning to invade the once peaceful room.

“Nothing at all, Mr. George. We mentioned Lee’s visit here, too. Nasty business his death on the old bridge. Must have been there some time before they found him.”

George thrust his hands in his pockets and pursed his lips.

“Another unpleasant fish,” he said. “Used to call here after black-market stuff. Persisted, too, although we never did a deal with him.”

“Which way did he go when he left you?”

“I don’t know. I left him at the door and went into the cow-shed to attend to a sick cow. He went through the gate.... I don’t know which direction he took.”

“Was it dark by then?”

“Quite dark. He had a torch and used it. I lit a lamp and went to the cow-shed. Had to drench the cow.... Nancy helped me, didn’t you, Nance?”

“Yes.”

“Well.... I’ve got to put the car away. Nice to meet you, Inspector. Hope you find the murderer....”

Young Emmott was evidently anxious to terminate the session. It was lunch-time, too. Some of the farm-hands were already in from the fields and were splashing in the wash-house, washing and chatting.

"I won't take any more of your time, Mr. Emmott," said the Inspector to the old man and after he had bidden him good-day and thanked him for his hospitality, Nancy led him to the front door.

"Here's your stick, Inspector, and your hat. Had you a coat?"

"Yes."

She passed him the raincoat from under his hat and saw him off.

Littlejohn hadn't gone far before he noticed the raincoat. It was like his own, but a bit more worn and greasy. To make sure, he thrust his hand in the pocket which should have contained a pair of gloves Letty had given him last Christmas. He always carried them in the right-hand pocket. Nothing doing, except a small ball of paper. Littlejohn turned and hurried back to the farm.

The first thing he saw as he reversed direction was George Emmott. He was climbing out of the shallow ditch just by the gate to the farmyard and putting something in his pocket.

Their eyes met. George was smiling thinly.

"Forgotten something, Inspector?"

"Yes. Got the wrong raincoat."

"Oh, that's mine, is it? I'll get yours."

"You lost something, too? In the ditch, I mean?" George eyed him with a frown.

"No. I thought I saw a rat there. It was nothing.... I'll get the coat."

They changed the raincoats and parted again.

Littlejohn on the way realised that in his fingers he still held the screw of paper he'd taken from George's pocket. He almost tossed it away. Then, he stopped and unfolded it. It was a numbered ticket.

WERRYMOUTH HARBOUR COMMISSIONERS

SWING BRIDGE.

Toll ... One Halfpenny.

XV

CASTLE HILL

CROMWELL was glad when they reached South Redport.

The 'bus was old and rickety, reeked of heavy oil, and the seats were so buoyant that the occupants bounced high into the air and back again at every pothole or undulation of the road. The driver, too, was a harum-scarum and threw the passengers all over the shop at each bend and curve. Cromwell complained to the conductress, when boldly and contemptuously looked him up and down, told him it wasn't her fault and that he'd better write to the company if he didn't like it.

They finally drew up at the terminus, a kind of barren fair ground, where the conductress told the driver about Cromwell. This little runt of a fellow, only the size of three pennyworth of copper, thereupon made preparations to fight, whereupon Cromwell handed him over to a passing 'bus inspector and left him being reprimanded.

Castle Hill was the main thoroughfare from the fair ground to the small harbour of South Redport. The sea was not visible until you reached the bottom, but the fresh breeze blowing up the street carried the sharp tang of salt air mingled with the odour of fish and petrol.

Number 29 was one of a row of cottages built on the hill. A small double-fronted place with a board over the door marked *CAFÉ, M. Pratt, proprietress*. In the window a fly-blown card: *APARTMENTS*.

It was lunch time and a few late visitors were straggling uphill apparently on their way to boarding-houses for the midday meal. They looked a dejected, hungry lot of a poor type. Apparently the small town catered for the humbler working classes, who insisted on the sea for holidays no matter what the hinterland was like.

Cromwell, although not inclined to lunch at such a place, thought that to have a meal might be the best way of getting to know what he wanted, so he overcame his scruples and entered.

The dining-room was right behind the front door. A few tables, probably accumulated from a junk-shop, littered the place. Old chairs set round them.

Soiled table-cloths, cheap cutlery, heavy cruets, and sugar-basins half-filled with dusty sugar. There were the remnants of a meal still on one table; most likely somebody's breakfast. The air had the flavour of not having been changed for weeks.

An elderly, slatternly woman entered from a door at the back of the room. A draught followed her and shook all the paper flowers on the gimcrack sideboard and rustled the newspaper in the empty old-fashioned grate.

"We're really closed. The season's over. But perhaps I could manage you a bit o' something," said the woman, dusting off the dry crumbs with a soiled cloth.

"What can you find me?" said Cromwell, cursing his luck and hoping for the best.

"How about a boiled egg and bread and butter and tea?" asked the woman hopefully. She was dried-up and past middle-age. Her face was wrinkled and yellow and the tight-drawn skin of her cheeks and forehead showed the skull plainly beneath. Wisps of unruly grey hair fell about her ears and now and then slid over her eyes making her squint. Her bust was braced tight and high in creaking corsets.

"Very well.... An egg will do."

There was at least a shell to keep the inside of the egg clean!

The old woman began to scamper back and forth from the kitchen to Cromwell's table. A separate journey for each item. Cup and saucer; plates; salt-cellar; jam-pot; bread-and-butter. Then a pause whilst the egg boiled.

"Are you all alone here?" asked Cromwell.

"Just at present. Me daughter's away on a holiday. Heard her husband, who's in the forces, 'ad been killed in an air-raid in London. Broke 'er up, it did. So, not bein' busy, I sent 'er away...."

She scuttered off to fetch the egg.

So Doris Pratt's husband was dead. And just as fate seemed to have solved the problem caused by Sam Prank's philandering, Sam himself gets killed. Bad luck!

The woman brought out the egg. It looked stale and soiled, but smelled all right when Cromwell chopped off the top.

"Nasty business over at Werrymouth," began Cromwell, when his waitress seemed inclined to hang about and gossip.

“Yes. We knew Sam Prank pretty well. He lodged here when he docked in Redport. A great friend of our Doris’s, he was. She was proper cut-up about it, I can tell yer.”

So that was it! Sam Prank lodged there, did he? And Doris, although married to somebody else, hadn’t been able to resist him.

The old woman was still talking.

“... Like as not they’d have made a match of it, only our Doris was married, as I just said. Fond of the girls, was Sam. No doubt in ’is time, had a girl in every port, as they say. Matter of fact, I’ve still got a photo of one of them he left behind in ’is room one time. I kept it. It was no use to ’im after he met Doris. Seemed to settle down with Doris, he did....”

“Could I see that photo, Mrs.... Mrs....”

“Pratt’s the name. Yes, I’ll get it. Though why you should be so interested in it, I don’t know. But then people do get morbid curiosity about murders, don’t they? Pity about Sam. Now that Doris has lost ’er husband, they might ’ave made a match of it.... I’ll get the picture. It’ll show you what a good lookin’ girl Sam could ’ave had, and he preferred our Doris....”

She hurried off, still talking to herself.

Cromwell could hear her rummaging and banging about upstairs as though turning out drawers in her hunt for the picture. The café remained quiet and forlorn. Flies crawled up the windows or lay in dead heaps on the sill. Outside a decrepit car chugged up the hill coughing and at any moment threatening to give up the ghost. Two women passed gossiping shrilly.

“I said to her, I said, it isn’t as if I was one who was used to doin’ that sort of thing....”

“You know what she is.... I wouldn’t trust a word she says....”

The old woman came blundering downstairs again.

In one hand she held the photograph, with the other she scratched her disorderly hair.

“I never asked you if you wanted some cake....”

Cromwell vigorously protested that he wanted nothing more. Already he saw in imagination those dirty hands preparing the meal he had just devoured....

“This is the picture. Good lookin’, isn’t she? Lived at Werrymouth, Sam said. But he preferred my Doris....”

Cromwell was not listening to the old woman's chatter. He was looking at the photograph in his hand. He was flabbergasted that such a girl should be connected with the sordid murder of Sam Prank.

The picture had been taken somewhere in the country, for the background was of a low wooded upland, with a white cottage or farm in the foreground. At the door of the house a girl was standing. She was tall, young and fair, and dressed in a short-sleeved blouse and a skirt, with a small afternoon tea apron, as though she had been suddenly caught and snapped without much time to get ready for it.

The forehead was broad and the style of hairdressing, a parting in the middle and the hair brushed sideways and backwards from the brow, gave it a calm, intelligent, slightly globular appearance. The face was oval and clean-cut with a small smiling mouth, a straight little nose and wide-set candid eyes, slightly cast-down either from shyness or artifice....

But it was the attitude of the girl which struck Cromwell most. She must have been in the early twenties, a slim, young figure, as fresh as a spring morning, with an air of almost childish innocence. It did not take the detective long to call to mind a very similar type. In odd, spare hours, he had been fond of rambling round the Tate Gallery before the war.... He recollected Arthur Hughes's *April Love*....

"Nice, ain't she? No wonder Sam ..."

"I'd like to keep this," interrupted Cromwell, glaring at the leering woman. He not only wanted to show it to Littlejohn in connection with the case; he wanted to rescue it from the hands of the dreadful Mrs. Pratt.... Mrs. Pratt whose married daughter had carried on an affair under her very roof with Sam Prank. Just because Sam had talked of money and spent his time swanking to her. She was nothing better than a ...

"You've got a nerve, I must say. What do *you* want it for?"

Mrs. Pratt simpered and looked ready to strike a bargain for the picture.

"I'm a police officer and as this was the property of the dead man, I propose to retain it."

Mrs. Pratt reared and clutched her scrawny bosom.

"You stinkin' cheat, you.... Here was I takin' you inter me confidence and all the time you a nosy copper, ... a bloody Judas...."

"That will do. You profess to be a friend of the late Prank. Then you're interested in helping to find who killed him. It's up to you to give us all the

help you can.”

“I’ve told you all I know. You wormed it out of me under false pretences....”

Cromwell pocketed the photograph.

“One more question, just to rouse your memory. Where was Prank getting all his money from? We know of his connections with your daughter, we know the trouble he got her into, and we know he paid-up handsomely when the child came. He was only a deck-hand. Where did the money come from?”

“I don’t know....”

The woman’s lips disappeared as she tightened her mouth in determination.

“Very well, then. We’ll have it out of you in court. You’ll be called for evidence at the adjourned coroner’s inquest and the tale will be dragged out of you publicly under oath....”

“It’s no good. I never knew where ’e got the money. Borrered it, I guess. He did say once that he’d some valuable letters he could sell to raise the wind, but ...”

“What letters?”

“How do I know? I never saw ’em. Nor yet knew who wrote ’em. I know nothin’, I tell yer. You can’t get blood out of a stone.”

A party of hikers had halted before the café and were debating about feeding there. They argued in undertones whether there was another place or not and finally entered reluctantly, as though half-convinced that Mrs. Pratt’s was a low dive where they might be set upon and robbed. They looked relieved to see one so respectable as Cromwell there and picked up courage and spirits, approached Mrs. Pratt and enquired about a meal.

The old woman clutched eagerly at this passing straw and welcomed them with spurious cordiality.

“That’ll be two-and-six,” she said to Cromwell and tried to make it appear to the new company that he was trying to get off without paying.

“Two and six!” piped the detective, forgetting all else but the cheek of the woman and deriving a sort of subconscious consolation by thinking of his expense sheet.

“Yes.... And pay up and be quick about it. Not even the police are goin’ to cheat me out o’ my just dues....”

He settled up hurriedly, contenting himself with the thought of the picture and the further news he had secured.

He could not resist a parting shot.

“You’ll get the summons to the coroner’s court in due course,” he said.

Mrs. Pratt’s reply to this cryptic utterance was lost, for Cromwell closed the door between them, but it must have been vehement, for he saw the hikers come streaming out immediately afterwards as though terrified of consuming food prepared by such a harpy.

XVI

THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE

“HAVEN’T you any less than this ...? You’ll ’ave to take your change in copper, then.”

The man in the little office on the Halfpenny Bridge was getting peevish. People kept giving him shillings as they paid toll. Elevenpence halfpenny change. It wasn’t good enough. One chap had even had the cheek to give him half-a-crown. Took it back, too, and said he’d go round the long way when Tebb started to count out two and five-pence halfpenny in copper....

Littlejohn was standing in the little cubby-hole trying to get some information out of Tebb. With his ungrateful employers who accorded him no honour for rescuing Prank’s corpse, his unruly clients, and the records of his tickets, the custodian of the bridge was getting properly tied-up.

“It’s really irregular, is this,” he grumbled, his ragged black moustache looking more like an inky waterfall than ever and his watery eyes wounded and bothered-looking from the many burdens he had to bear. “You ought to ask the office ...’arbour Commissioners keeps the records.... *’aven’t yer got an ’apenny? You’ll ’ave to take the change in copper, then. That’s about fifty this mornin’ as ’as given me a bob.... What d’yer think I am; a bank?*”

So it went on. People who wanted to pay clicked through the turnstile. Those with season tickets passed through a wicket and, now and then, when a car or lorry hooted to cross the bridge, Tebb had to rush out and open the big gate. He was like a juggler with too many balls in the air, in danger of missing one.

“Right. I’d better get down to the office, then,” said Littlejohn, knocking out his pipe on the turnstile. At this rate he’d be here all day.

The gatekeeper belched and seemed considerably relieved inwardly.

“No, no.... That’s all right. I can tell yer, I think. Wot is it?”

“ You know the night you fished Prank out of the basin here? Have you got the numbers of the tickets you sold just before he fell in?”

A hand extended through the glass hole which gave access to the pay desk and dropped a halfpenny. Tebb thrust a ticket in it, released the turnstile and seemed very pleased at not having to give change for once.

“Last Saturday. Yes, I think I ’ave. The rolls of tickets and the cash go into the Commissioners’ office every night and the watchman locks ’em up. But I keep ’ere the startin’ and stoppin’ numbers mornin’ and night, so to speak. See ...”

He showed Littlejohn a printed official list with spaces for a month’s details of tickets sold daily, with the beginning number when the bridge opened and the ending figure when it closed.

“Now, ’ere’s Saturday. Startin’ number Doubleyew, thirty-four oh, oh, oh, four. Stoppin’ number, Doubleyew, thirty-four oh seven oh seven. Total sold for day, seven oh four. Total cash twenty nine an’ fourpence. See? Course I can’t be to an odd ticket or so.... *Pay for both those kids, missus. No ’alf tickets for kids. Lor lummy, bad enough messin’ about at a ’alfpenny a time, without half tickets. Get on. Yer ’oldin’ up the traffic....*”

Tebb turned to Littlejohn again, pushed his hat back on his head and resumed.

“ Cripes! They’ll drive me dotty. Sometimes I wonder ’ow I keep me ’ands from strikin’ ’em.... Where was we? Oh yes. Now as far as I’d say, and I can’t be to ten or so, I’d say about the time Prank was pushed in the water I’d sell, lemme see, ... say ... Doubleyew, three four oh six nine nine. Tell yer why ...”

A car hooted for the gates Tebb glared through his window and snorted. Then, he suddenly sprang to attention, adjusted the angle of his hat to a respectable tilt and hurled himself on the job. The car passed and the bridge-keeper returned, lifting up his curly-toed shoes as though proud of what he’d just done.

“That’s the Chairman of the ’arbour Board ... Nice bloke.... Where was we? Yes ... W340699, I was sayin’. And why? Because I finished up at W340707 and I’d say eight or nine only went through after the murder and *bought* tickets. And they was mostly *from* the ’eadland. Courtin’ couples out for a pennyworth o’ cuddlin’ in the dark. A rare place fer cuddlin’ in the dark.... You’d be surprised wot goes on on the Head after dark ... And before dark, too, for that matter....”

His face lit up with a lascivious leer, which reminded Littlejohn of a cornered polecat showing its teeth.

“Most o’ the natives ’ave season tickets and those as ’as to go home to the Head use the wicket, you see.... Wouldn’t you, if you lived there? Season ticket for a year costs five bob. That’s an ’undred and twenty times. Coming and goin’ most of ’em cross the bridge ... well ... I’d say a thousand times per annum.... Season ticket’s dirt cheap....”

“So you’d say W340699, eh, Tebb?”

The ticket in Littlejohn’s pocket was numbered 340694. Not so far out!

“Do the farmers on the Head use the bridge much?”

“Meanin’?”

“People like the Emmotts and the ...”

“No. You see it’s sixpence a time fer vehicles *and* no season tickets. Farmers like the Emmotts, greedy ’uns as ’ud skin a flint, won’t pay no sixpences. They run their vans round by the old bridge. A bit longer, but saves ’em a tanner a time, see? I don’t blame ’em, though I sez it as shouldn’t. Tolls on this bridge is too high. Ought to ’ave been done away with long since. It’s paid fer itself ten times over from tolls. But the Commissioners reckon that the ’olidaymakers can afford to pay and they’re buildin’ up a fund from the takings for ’arbour improvements.”

“And when they come to town on foot, these farmers, do they use this way?”

“I suppose so, though I ’aven’t noticed it. They mostly come in their cars. For instance, the Emmotts you was speakin’ of fetch supplies and sich like in a sort of little van ’ooked onto their private car, which when they want to use private-like, they unhook the van and there you are. None of ’em ’as season tickets, that I know....”

“I see. Do you remember to whom you issued that?” Littlejohn put the ticket he’d found in young Emmott’s raincoat on the desk before Tebb.

“Wot an ’ope,” grunted Tebb. “That was issued in the pitch dark, and unless whoever tuck it popped into the box just to say good night or how’s tricks, I’d never know. Wot agen? *Eelevenpence ’a’penny change ... you’ll ’ave to take it in copper ...*”

“Look ’ere, sir ...”

And by way of demonstration Tebb left his own perch and walked round to the pay-hole in the role of one of his own customers.

“Wot do you see of me,” he breathed, “When I stretches up to me full height?”

A portion of the small bridge-keeper’s person covered the pigeon-hole. One brass button, an expanse of blue serge, soiled soft collar, with triangle of shirt not to match, ragged tie, and a bit of scrawny neck sprouting from the top.

“See? A man without a face, I am, ain’t I? Well, that’s wot it is here after dark. The light isn’t good on account o’ black-out. We’ve ’ad to put out the big lamp we usedter ’ave over the main gate and all that we see o’ passers-by now is just wot you saw o’ me. No face, no ’ead at all for that matter.... You’ll excuse me ...”

Tebb shot out again hastily.

A squad of youngsters from the local O.C.T.U., marching smartly, approached the bridge. Tebb opened the gates and, old soldier that he was, stood to attention stiffly.

“Break step!” There was a shuffle and the steady rhythmic tramp of feet changed to a confused scuffling.

Littlejohn took the opportunity and went on his way.

Cromwell was back at the police station. He produced the photograph he had taken from Mrs. Pratt, at the same time telling the tale of his morning’s work and the sordid meal he’d eaten at Redport.

“Well, well,” said Littlejohn. “We have been busy on the Emmotts. That’s the girl I’ve been interviewing.”

Cromwell looked crestfallen.

“Don’t look so depressed, Cromwell. This picture’s very useful. I’ll keep it in my pocket, for I’m going to Headlands Farm again very soon.”

And he told Cromwell and Hoggatt, who had joined them, what had happened at Emmott’s Farm and at the swing-bridge.

“It looks as though we’re on something at last, doesn’t it?” exclaimed Hoggatt, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

“That’s right. We’re now on something definite....”

Sometimes it came early in the case; sometimes late. First, absorbing the atmosphere of the strange new place to which he’d been called to help. Getting to know strangers, sorting out the characters of the drama, finding out who was helpful and who hostile. Anybody from among them might have done the deed; or it might be somebody right outside the pale. Waiting

for something to crystalise, for a scent to attract the hunter.... If the case never developed beyond this, then ... another unsolved crime for the files.

But, as likely as not, some trail was picked up, some conviction, perhaps only a sort of intuition, evolved. Off we go ... the smooth machinery of police routine is in gear. Piece by piece, the case is built up, a jigsaw taking shape under the hands of the expert. Until, finally ...

“Do you know the Emmotts, Hoggatt?”

“Yes. A proud, stand-offish lot. Integrity absolutely undoubted. They pride themselves on it. Family honour and all that, you know. The old man’s been paralysed and confined indoors for years. But he was a bit of a tartar when he was up and about, I believe. You’d have thought he owned all Werrymouth, they say. A fiery eye and a convincing manner. Fanatically proud of his family and its long record of local distinction and integrity ...”

“What about Nancy?”

“I don’t know....”

Hoggatt stroked his chin and mused a bit.

“... Always strikes me as being a bit simple. Damned good looking and many of the local chaps would give their eyes for her, especially with the family money. But nowadays that type of mild, sweet country maiden girl isn’t bred. The modern girl’s sophisticated and knows all there is to know. So that’s why, somehow, Nancy’s a bit of a puzzle. Myself, I’d say she’s just about elevenpence half-penny to the shilling. Nothing wrong, I mean ... not crazy or anything like that. But ...”

“I see what you’re getting at,” said Littlejohn. He smiled at Hoggatt’s frantic efforts to paint a picture. What about the brother?”

“There are two. One’s at sea with the Merchant Navy. Never took to farming. The other, George, is the least likeable of the pair. He’s the younger and runs the farm. Takes after his father, but will never quite catch up to him. Lacks, somehow, that hard core of character that the old man’s got. Still, he’s as proud and fanatical on family matters. He’s set about one or two of the lads of the town who’ve fancied their chances with Nancy. Got himself in trouble a year or two ago for thrashing a chap who mentioned his sister in a pub....”

“Indeed!”

“ Why? Do you think he’s something to do with Sam Prank’s death, sir?”

“I’m sure he’s mixed-up in the business somewhere. Look at the facts we’ve discovered. We’ve found out that just before the crime, he crossed the swing-bridge, presumably from the Head to the quay. Then, Cromwell finds among Sam Prank’s abandoned effects, a picture of Nancy. We know, too, that on the night of his death, Rosie Lee was at Emmott’s Farm. They frankly admit that. Now, George Emmott saw Lee off their premises. My conversation with him seems to have reminded George that Lee had a torch. We know that he hadn’t one when he was brought here dead. Presumably, he lost it on the way ... I carried off the wrong raincoat—how I did that, I don’t know—and when I returned to change it, I found George scrambling in a ditch by the farm gate. What for? Was he hunting for that torch and was it the object he put in his pocket as he caught sight of me?”

Cromwell filled his meerschaum and laboriously lighted it.

“Where does Boake come in, though?” he said between the puffs.

“Ah,” replied the Inspector. “That’s what we have still to find out.”

The ease with which Littlejohn smoked made the struggling Cromwell look like an amateur.

“Have you got a theory, then?” asked Hoggatt eagerly.

“Well, hardly a full-blown one, Superintendent, but the faint glimmering of one....”

“Are we allowed to know ...? Or do you keep it under your hat until the end, like the men in books?”

Cromwell swallowed a mouthful of smoke and interrupted the conference by choking coughs.

Littlejohn was never one for keeping his thoughts to himself when sharing them with colleagues on the job would help the case. In fact, he’d never possessed the effrontery to fend-off his eager colleagues and finally present a dramatic *denouement*. He was essentially a team man and never tried to keep the ball to himself if, by a pass to a colleague, he could bring the solution nearer.

“There’s no secret about my ideas on the case, although none of us would be so indiscreet as to startle the hare by shouting in his vicinity.... I think that somehow or other, Sam Prank had been pestering Nancy. Cromwell’s old hag at Redport said he gave her up for her own daughter. Most proud mothers would say the same. However, Sam was becoming a nuisance to Nancy. Now, Boake was a family friend and very fond of the

girl. Where does he come in? We know on the day before his death, Sam visited Boake. What for? We thought blackmail. Had Sam somehow got a hold over Nancy, or Boake, or the Emmotts? After Sam's visit, Boake sent for George Emmott. What for? To tell him what Sam was after and warn him? Whatever it was, Sam died that night just after George had crossed the Halfpenny Bridge, didn't he? Did George put paid to him? Or was it Boake?"

"But Boake's supposed to be too ill to move...."

"True. We've to find out more about his illness and whether or not he could have managed to get to the quay...."

"But ..."

"The fire-escape from the corridor on Boake's wing of the hospital ends within fifty yards of the quay, I noticed to-day. Was he fit to scramble down and push Sam in the water after hitting him over the head? The day after the murder, I'm told, Boake had a relapse. Was it through the news ... or did he really get up? I'd say it was the news that did it and that George did the work for him after their little talk together. But we must be sure. I'm going to see the hospital people again almost at once...."

"And what about Lee?" insisted Hoggatt.

"Lee lent Prank money and Prank told him he'd repay him from the proceeds of a little job he had in hand. Sam also left a packet with Lee for safe-keeping. Did Lee, on hearing of Sam's death, open the packet and, finding it worth selling to the Emmotts for some reason, take the foolish step of going there, bearding the lions in their den, and trying a bit of blackmail on his own account? They said he went gathering black-market stuff. What a tale! They said they'd shown him the door several times before, but he persisted. As if a man like Lee would keep pestering a family like the Emmotts...."

"So you think it's George?"

"I'd put my money on him at present. But that's only a theory. We've got to make a watertight case before we can breathe a word about it outside this room...."

"I can quite see that."

There was a tap on the door and a red-faced sergeant thrust his face in.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, addressing Hoggatt. "They've just 'phoned from the hospital. Mr. Boake's wanting to see Inspector Littlejohn. He's that

anxious about it, they say, that it's not doing him any good. Could the Inspector go soon?"

"Thanks, sergeant," said Littlejohn. "Nothing would suit me better. I'll go right away."

As he passed through the charge-room, he overheard two constables talking. One was laughing over an episode in which he'd just been involved.

"... Just had to make the peace between little Tebb, on the swing-bridge, and a hulking chap who'd offered him a ten-bob note for a halfpenny toll. Tebb was pulling his jacket off and Wanting to set about him.... The big chap took to his heels...."

XVII

A CONFESSION

LITTLEJOHN made his way through the narrow streets of old Werrymouth and entered the Samaritan Hospital. Old Fred Kissack, the janitor, met him at the door.

"I'm glad you've arrived, Inspector. Mr. Boake's nearly off 'is 'ead wanting to see you...."

"Why?"

"He's been in a proper tear ever since I told him you'd called here. I gossip with 'im when I lay the fire in the mornings and I sort of collect all the bits of news for him. Nacherally, I told 'im of your call. And then, yesterday, Mr. Podmore was here, sick-visitin', and after he'd gone, nothing would do for Mr. Boake but that he must see you. He never slept a wink last night, they tell me, so Sister said to please him, he could see you. Better not waste your time here with my chatter, sir. I'll let 'em know you're waiting."

They told Littlejohn he'd be allowed a few minutes only and that he mustn't disturb the patient.

The private wards of the Samaritan are in a small new wing on the first floor. Twelve of them; six on each side of a long airy corridor. Access to this annexe is from the main wing, but there is an emergency door with a fire escape leading from the far end of the passage down to the street.

Littlejohn felt a bit excited as he entered Boake's room.

"Good afternoon, sir. I hope you're feeling better."

But Boake didn't look it. All Littlejohn could see of him was his head and face protruding from the white sheets, which his pale, flabby hands were grasping tightly.

The head was large and fine, with a shock of grey hair. Boake had been shaved and his rather heavy grey moustache was trimmed. His skin looked healthy and pink enough, but his grey eyes were sunken in deep dark orbits and glowed with excitement or fever.

"I'm better, Inspector, and I'm glad you've called. You've been very worried about me, I hear."

“Well, sir, I oughtn’t to be bringing my troubles to the sick room, but as I gather it will relieve your anxiety to hear what all this is about. I’ll try to tell you very briefly. You see, Sam Prank, who met an untimely death the other day, as you’ve already heard, called here to see you just before it happened ... The day before, in fact, didn’t he?”

“Yes. That’s what I want to talk to you about. I know you’ve been delving into my connections with Prank. Mr. Podmore told me when he was last here.”

He broke off and coughed a little. His voice was unsteady from weakness or lack of use.

“We haven’t very long together, Inspector, and I’ll be glad if you’ll listen patiently to what I’ve got to say. It will save you and a lot of innocent people much trouble if I tell you my tale.... By the way, Kissack told me you’d been enquiring about the Emmotts calling here. Have you been to the farm to see them?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You found them all well?”

The eyes glowed feverishly again.

“Yes.”

“That’s good. Now, let me get on. I want to make a statement which I will sign later....”

“This is rather a surprise, sir. I hadn’t come prepared ...

“Never mind that. You can jot down a few notes, take them away with you, and have the statement typed. Bring or send it to me and I’ll sign it. You needn’t think I want it copying out verbatim. It’s the spirit, not the letter, I’m after. It’s a confession I’ve to make. I killed Sam Prank.”

It was Littlejohn’s turn to go pale. This was quite a bombshell. During the whole investigation he’d regarded Boake as totally *hors de combat* and safely tucked in his hospital bed.... Now, here he was saying that he’d pushed Prank into the dock basin. Or, that was what it amounted to.

The schoolmaster spoke in slow measured tones, staring at the ceiling.

“I know you’re a bit surprised, Inspector, but I can explain.”

Littlejohn took out his notebook and pencil. It seemed silly, but that was what Boake wanted, so to please him ...

“... First of all, maybe you think it impossible for me to have got up in my condition and put an end to Prank. Let me explain. On the Friday before

Prank died, I was allowed up for the first time. They were quite pleased with me here and I must say that I, too, was very well satisfied. I stayed out whilst my bed was made, sitting in a chair for most of the time. I'd been worrying them for a bath, as well. They said, if I was good, I could go to the bathroom, just down the corridor there, in a few days' time. Got that?"

Boake was growing animated and levered himself up in bed almost to sitting position.

A nurse put her head round the door.

"All right, Mr. Boake? You've not much longer with your visitor. Won't do to over-tire you..."

"I'm all right, thanks, nurse."

"... Where were we? Yes ... Then, on Friday afternoon, Prank called. He used to attend my school and a more disreputable fellow I never came across. He was bad at school and we couldn't do any good with him. As he grew older, he got worse. Well, he came to extort money from me. He had information in his possession which, if disclosed, would have made some people very dear to me most unhappy. He'd been to see me once before at the school and I'd foolishly given him most of my ready money in exchange for his silence. I thought that would have satisfied him, especially as he gave his word.... But what are promises from a man like Prank? I made a big mistake in starting it. To cut a long story short, he came to squeeze me again. Pleas and threats on my part being in vain, I decided that I'd have to do something drastic...."

Littlejohn jotted down a note or two. It all seemed utterly fantastic, but Boake sounded so earnest.

"After he'd gone I began to think things over. If I could manage to get out, I could perhaps silence him for good. You see, the thing became an obsession. I'd willingly have given my own life to save those friends of mine...."

"Suppose you tell me, sir, just how you got out of this place to kill Prank, and how you knew where he was likely to be...."

"I told you, Inspector, he was here threatening me on the Friday afternoon. He wanted another two hundred pounds and he'd give me till ten o'clock on Saturday night. I couldn't get out myself. I must arrange for somebody to meet him just by the swing-bridge at ten-thirty and hand him

the money. And if I told the police, the trouble would start, because he'd made provision for the letters...."

"They were letters, were they, sir?"

"Yes.... I'll tell you that later. As I said, I thought the thing out as I lay here. This was only the beginning. I've not much money ... only what I earn and the prospect of my pension.... I couldn't keep up payment under the blackmailing scheme, in which case Prank would be sure to hand the letters to my wife, as he said he would. So I decided to kill him if I could get to the rendez-vous."

"I see...."

"There's not much more to tell. There was nobody about. I got out of bed and tried a turn or two round the room. I managed all right. Then, I had a rest and tried another turn or two. Convinced that I could manage it, I settled down and made my plan.... You're getting it down, aren't you, Inspector?"

Littlejohn continued to scribble a few notes in his book. He felt to be living in an unreal world. Boake seemed so sincere, yet the story was incredible.

"The night sister comes on at nine-thirty. By ten, she's visited and tucked us all in and the wing is quiet for the night. Now and then, you hear her visiting the serious cases, but usually, she won't pop in here again until about midnight to see if you're asleep or needing anything. When she'd left me, I waited calmly, finishing my plan in my mind and then at ten o'clock, I got up, put on my trousers and dressing-gown and let myself out. The fire escape at the end of the passage gives on to the street and the door is always loose. I went that way. At the door stands a bin of sand for A.R.P. purposes. From that sand I filled one of my socks and thus I had a weapon. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Time to settle down again...." The nurse was back looking very solicitous.

"Just another five minutes, nurse."

"Very well, sir, but not a minute longer. And don't you go getting excited, or else ..."

Boake was speeding-up his tale and getting worked up about it.

"I don't know however I managed to do it. Half down the steps I was drained of energy ... I stopped a dozen times on the way and then actually

sat on the pavement in a side-street whilst I waited for Prank. Finally, he arrived. I could see his form.... No mistaking it.

... Tall and with that peculiar twisting stoop I always hated. I made no bones. I gathered all my strength, hit him with the home-made sand-bag and as he reeled, pushed him in the water. I prayed that he'd drown ... and he did."

"Then ..."

"I made my way back here by slow degrees and got back to bed. I was in a stupor and don't know how I got back. Sheer will, I think, for I can't remember anything after I pushed Prank in the water. The next I knew, the nurse was with me and I was fearfully ill...."

"You don't remember anyone seeing you ...?"

"You mean.... Oh yes. The lighthouse coming on and the two sailors who gave evidence.... No. I was too all-in for even that."

"I see. Do you happen to know a man called Lee?"

"Lee? No. Why?"

"I just wondered. He was a friend of Prank's, that's all. And now, sir. Just a word about the blackmail business. What was it all about?"

"It's very awkward, Inspector.... But I suppose I must tell you, because if I don't, somebody else might be falsely accused of the crime I've done. I once wrote some letters to a friend of mine. I don't know what came over me, but I did. I don't get on well with my wife. It's my own fault. I'm difficult to live with, I know. Well, I met this other lady. We grew friendly ... intimately so. Nothing wrong, really, but she brought such joy and sweetness to a drab existence, that I wrote and told her so.... About half-a-dozen letters, written whilst I was away in London at a conference, that's all. Somehow, Prank got hold of 'em. Said he'd hand them to my wife if I didn't pay up. It wasn't so much the row I'd get in, that I was troubled about. It was the scandal that would start about my friend. My wife's long been seeking a way of getting at me.... She'd have made full use of such information, I'm sure. Probably have left me. Gossip would have done the rest. I couldn't stand it and the thought of my friend...."

"Miss Nancy Emmott?"

Boake's face turned ashen and he rose in the bed.

"How do you know ...?"

“Time’s up, Mr. Boake. You really must go now, sir.” It was the nurse again. Boake, however, wasn’t having any.

“Do go away, nurse. I’m all right. Just another few minutes. This is important. I beg you, nurse....”

“Oh, very well. But don’t get so excited. This is my last word. Five more minutes, and not a second longer.”

“Oh, dear. Yes, yes. All right, nurse....”

Littlejohn laid his hand gently on that of the sick man. “I’ve already told you I’ve spoken to the Emmotts. All of them. They speak of you as a very dear friend....”

“Yes. God bless them.... I had to tell you all this because I thought you’d think they’d done it. You see, Kissack said he’d told you that Nancy and George had called and that I’d spoken to George alone. I was sure you’d discover that Sam Prank had for long enough been pestering Nancy with his attentions and that there’d been a lot of trouble about it. Then, if somehow you heard about the letters, too, you’d be sure to think that the Emmotts had done it. By the way, I suppose the letters were on the body when they got it from the water ...”

“No, sir.”

“He must have hidden them somewhere.... Any way, it doesn’t matter now. When they’re found the police will see to it that they’re destroyed, won’t they? Or else give them back to Nancy? They’re addressed to her, you know. They’ll be all right, won’t they ... they will ... you’ll promise me that?”

“I’ll see that they do nobody any harm, sir.”

“Thank you, Inspector. I can only say I’m glad I told you and have cleared my friends. I can’t tell you what I owe them for the past ten years of peace and joy in their home. The temporary madness about Nancy passed off, you understand, but the friendship for them all remained.... They were good to me....”

“You’re tired out, sir. I must be off....”

“You’ll send me the statement round for signing, Inspector? And then, when I’m well and fit to get up, I’m in your hands. Part of this sorry tale will have to come out, but, at least the Emmotts will be safe,”

“Yes. I’ll send round the statement, sir. I’m afraid that in this informal talk I’ve failed to warn you of one thing. Your statement may be used in

evidence and before you sign it, the men who bring it will also caution you....”

“That’ll be all right, Inspector. I understand. I quite understand....”

Littlejohn left the room bewildered. Hoggatt and Cromwell were as dumbfounded when he told them what had happened. The official typist was making a proper job of the statement and Littlejohn was telling his colleagues of the latest development.

“... But it’s too far-fetched to believe,” said Hoggatt. Littlejohn rammed down the tobacco in his pipe and lit it.

“Of course. The poor old chap’s making a very gallant attempt to shield his friends. He knows nothing about Lee and his connection with the case, and his murder. He knows nothing about what’s happened to the letters. All he knows about the crime is what he’s heard from the gossiping Kissack, the hospital porter, and the newspaper accounts of the inquest, which Kissack’s been giving him to read. Furthermore, I enquired about the fire-escape as a means of exit in the night. The Sister said it was quite true. The door was always loose. But not on the night Sam was killed, or a few nights before. The fire-escape had been painted and they’d locked the door because the smell of paint was filling the wards and making the serious cases feel sick....”

“Well what was all Boake’s rigmarole about, then?” Cromwell was laboriously puffing his meershaum again. “Boake heard I’d been talking to Podmore. He heard, too, from Kissack that I’d been enquiring about the Emmotts. So he primed himself with a tale for me to put me off the track. We’ll let him sign the statement, but we’ll not relax our vigil. This interview has supplied us with one important new bit of evidence. Sam Prank had got hold of some love letters Boake had written to Nancy Emmott!”

“Good Lord!”

“Yes. Sam had one payment out of Boake and then offered them to him at a price, telling him to send the money to him at a rendez-vous on the quay. Nancy Emmott called the morning after Prank’s threats. Boake sent her down to get George, whom he probably told of the letters and the blackmail. George acted vigorously.... That’s one more point in the case against George Emmott. A proud lot like those weren’t going to have

Nancy's name dragged about the town as carrying on an affair with old Boake.... So ...”

“The pity of it was, however, that Sam had given the letters to Rosie Lee for safe keeping and when Sam died, Rosie tried to cash-in. With the results we know. But Boake doesn't know....”

Hoggatt was quite excited.

“We ought to keep an eye on the Emmotts,” he said.

“Somehow, I don't think that need worry us unduly. They seem quite convinced that we don't suspect a thing,” replied Littlejohn. “At any rate, I'm going there again this evening. I'll put a question or two to them, and after that, you'd better have a man up there to keep watch on them unseen.”

Cromwell looked more melancholy than ever.

“I never met such a mess of a case. We suspect George Emmott, but how are we going to prove anything? We're no nearer now than when we started....”

“Yes, we are,” replied Littlejohn, smoking calmly. “We've at least a scent to carry us along. The whole business to my mind centres round the Boake-Emmott affair. We've got a suspect. We've put the machine in gear and now we're off after him....”

The statement was finished and ready for Boake to sign. A sergeant and a constable in plain clothes took it to the Samaritan and, after duly cautioning Boake, obtained his signature to it, he having read it carefully.

That night Boake died in his sleep. He had managed to get hold of a bottle of morphine from the hospital medicine trolley which was sometimes left in the corridor by his door.

XVIII

A SUDDEN SET-BACK

BEFORE Boake died, however, Littlejohn visited the Emmotts again. The schoolmaster's confession was so obviously an effort to shield them, that the Inspector felt an urgent need to study their reactions to certain questions. He took the short cut across the swing-bridge. As he tendered his halfpenny toll, Tebb peered through at his face and excitedly invited him into his box.

"I bin wantin' to see you.... I've more news for you about that ticket ... W340694 you said, didn't you? Well it was issued at a quarter to eleven ...!"

They could have knocked down Littlejohn with a feather!

"Are you sure, Tebb?"

The gatekeeper was hurt.

"Wot d'yer think I'm botherin' about, if it isn't?"

The cascade-like moustache bristled.

"How do you know?"

"I'm cornin' to that if you'll only let me. A chap called Bulmer who's courtin' a girl on the Head, was held-up by the accident last Saturday. You see 'ow it was? There was I huntin' in the dock for the chap as had fell in, and the bridge gates and turnstile locked. Up comes Bulmer, can't get through and waits there, lookin' through the bars o' the bridge and watchin' wot's going on till I gets back to the tickets. I lets him through and there you are...."

"Well?"

"Now, I'm cornin' to it ..."

Tebb drew himself up and thrust his face close to Littlejohn's, breathing a blast of peppermint over him.

"I know it was about a quarter to eleven, because it struck that just as we got Prank on the dockside an' I went to the bridge to see if anybody was waitin' there to pay. There was one or two, but Bulmer spoke to me, see? So, I knew 'im. Well ... I saw Bulmer just after you'd gone and I asks him

if he's got his turnstile ticket that I give 'im last Saturday. He pulls out about a dozen from the ticket-pocket of his overcoat. Seems to save 'em up, as you might say. I picks out the one I wants right away. And the number's W340692...."

"And which way do you think 340694 was going ... *To* or *from* the Head?"

"I'd say *from*. Because after Bulmer spoke and went through, I seem to recollect lettin' one or two more through as was behind 'im. Couldn't make out who they was in the dark. But I always lets the lot through for one way first, and then those for the other. The turnstile's geared both ways, a different pedal workin' each. Look!"

And he showed Littlejohn the mechanism.

The Inspector had to admit that, although he was disappointed in the new developments, Tebb had certainly added a substantial contribution to the case. He gave him the price of a whisky and soda and the little man seemed hardly able to wait for his relief to arrive and enable him to dissipate it. He was doing double shift, he said. His pal had just gone off to give his daughter away at her wedding and they had changed places to enable him to make a proper job of it.

"You'd think it was the first, the fuss he's makin'. He's married-off four out o' five daughters.... Now, if it was me...."

In the excitement of his bit of sleuthing, Tebb had forgotten his clients on the bridge and was neglecting his duties. A queue had formed and was growing abusive. Littlejohn slipped away just in time to avoid the gatekeeper's view on the wedding ceremony and how a man who had many daughters to dispose of ought to face it.

On the way to the farm Littlejohn pondered the new development.

George Emmott had not arrived on the scene, then, until after the murder. That was, if he had not already been on the quay, crossed the old free-bridge and then returned to the scene of his crime to see how things were going on. Or, perhaps to give himself an alibi at the bridge. But, if it was all done in the dark and he hadn't made himself known to Tebb, what good was such an alibi? Perhaps he'd dropped his weapon in the scuffle and returned for it. Among the crowd that gathered there, he would perhaps have been unrecognised and found what he sought....

It was all very strange and disappointing.

The threshing-machine was busy at Headlands Farm and Littlejohn spotted George busy superintending operations in a field adjacent to the house. The Inspector managed to slip past unobserved and rang the front-door bell. Nancy answered and seemed surprised to see him. She led him into the stuffy front room again.

"You're soon back, Inspector," said the girl, her cold blue eyes expressionless as ever, but her lips and hands moving nervously.

"Yes, Miss Emmott. I'm afraid I must bother you again, but this was found among the late Sam Prank's effects and I thought you'd like to have it back."

He produced the snapshot of Nancy which Cromwell had secured.

The girl made as though to snatch it and then recovered.

"Why! It's mine.... It was with the ..."

She halted and taking the photograph thrust it in the pocket of her apron.

"It was with the ...?" repeated Littlejohn.

"Nothing. I wan't thinking what I was saying."

"It was with the *letters* did you mean?"

The girl was definitely rattled this time.

"I said no such thing and if you're going to ..."

With an impulsive gesture she threw open the door into the house and called to her father.

"The police-inspector's here again father...."

She led the way to the kitchen where the old man was sitting in his usual place, as though he hadn't moved since Littlejohn's last visit. Nancy Emmott seemed to be seeking her father's protection.

Old Emmott was not smiling this time. He had caught the look in his daughter's face and his own expression froze.

"What do you want again? Can't we be left in peace by any of you?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I was just returning a photograph we found in the late Sam Prank's belongings...."

"Photograph? Where is it? Give it to me.... Have you got it? Give it to me."

Under the benign exterior lurked a real old war-horse!

Nancy handed over the picture.

"What was Prank doing with this, Nancy? Who gave it to him?"

"I don't know. I never ..."

"Send for George. He should know of this. He's with the thrasher."

Nancy hurried out.

"I can't see why you should keep worrying round here," grumbled Emmott petulantly. "We've nothing to do with Prank and his affairs."

"How then can you explain his possession of the picture of your daughter?"

"He must have got it from one of her friends. It was taken years ago and she gave several copies to people.... I have one myself. George took it, I think."

George Emmott clinked into the kitchen. He, too, was in a rare temper.

"You again! I'll trouble you to keep away from here, Inspector, if you don't want pitching out on your neck. We're too busy to be bothered by a lot of meddling bobbies and I won't have my father and sister pestered...."

"I can look after myself," chimed in the old man. "The Inspector's just returned a picture of Nancy which was found in Prank's pocket or something."

George looked at the photograph and glared at Littlejohn.

"Well? What does it signify? He's probably pinched it from some place. You didn't give it to him, did you, Nance?"

"Eh?"

The girl seemed miles away. Then she replied without conviction.

"... Oh no. I didn't give it him."

"There you are," snapped George. "And now perhaps you'll be off. As you see, I'm busy to-day. Farmers haven't time to waste like the police."

Littlejohn, half-sitting on the kitchen table, listened to it all patiently.

"Have you quite finished, Mr. Emmott?" he said at length. "Because I haven't. I want to know why you were down on the swing-bridge a quarter of an hour after Prank was murdered and where you were at half-past-ten."

George's face grew bright. He seemed pleased with his own thoughts. He was going to take a rise out of Littlejohn.

"From nine o'clock till half-past-ten last Saturday, I was with a cow that was having calving trouble here. The vet was with me. Winterbottom, from town. He'll confirm it if you like. And the reason why I crossed the bridge was I went part way back with him. Smart of you to find out I was there."

"Why did you go all that way with the vet. at that time of night?"

Littlejohn outwardly was unperturbed as ever and George Emmott was a bit disappointed with his reaction to the triumphant alibi. Inwardly, however, the Inspector felt his heart sink. More trouble!

George Emmott was talking.

“If you’ve ever spent the best part of two hours with an agonised cow in calf, you’ll know the need of a breath of fresh air and a change. I walked down with Winter-bottom, crossed the toll-bridge and came back by the old bridge. And now, have you done?”

“No. On Saturday morning you visited Mr. Boake in the hospital. First, Miss Nancy took him flowers. That’s so, isn’t it, Miss Emmott?”

“Yes. I can do that, I hope, to a friend without starting a hue and cry.”

“Then Mr. Boake sent you for your brother, who was outside in the van?”

“Yes. You seem to know all about it.”

“When your brother came to the ward, did you return with him, Miss Emmott?”

“No.”

“You went back to the van?”

“Er ... yes.”

“Sure?”

George Emmott again flared up.

“What the devil are you getting at? Leave the girl alone. She’s nothing to do with Prank’s death. Nor have any of us...”

“It’ll pay you best to help the police in this matter, Mr. Emmott. It’s double murder, remember, and your family have connections with both the dead men.”

Old Emmott intervened. He had been sitting quietly casting his eyes from one to the other of the arguing group.

“Answer his questions, George, and let’s get it over,” he said sternly.

“Thank you, Mr. Emmott. I’ve nearly finished. What did Mr. Boake want you for, Mr. George?”

The young farmer’s face flushed a dirty red.

“What the hell’s that got to do with you?”

“I’ll tell you, then. Some way or other, Sam Prank had got hold of a packet of letters written by Mr. Boake to Miss Emmott. I think the photograph was originally with the letters, too. They were, shall we say,

sentimental letters and for Mrs. Boake to have got them might have caused misunderstanding and scandal to both. Boake and your family....”

“Nancy! George! Is this true?”

Old Emmott apparently hadn’t known a thing about the letters.

By way of reply, Nancy Emmott flounced from the room and slammed the door.

“Send Mercy up to her at once and see that she’s all right,” said Saul Emmott to George, who at once obeyed as though it were a royal command.

“You’ve upset the girl. She’s not used to this kind of thing. I see George knows all about it. He’ll answer you,” continued the old man, bewildered and apparently ready to give his family the length of his tongue for keeping him in ignorance as soon as the visitor’s back was turned.

George returned and churlishly faced the music.

“Well, get on with it,” he said truculently.

“I was saying Prank had got the letters. He called at the hospital in urgent need of money and tried blackmailing Boake.”

“Did he?”

“Yes. And Boake sent for you and told you so. He asked you for help and advice, especially as your own sister was concerned.”

“Why wasn’t I told?” thundered old Emmott angrily.

“We didn’t want to worry you, dad. You’ve enough ...”

“I should have been told. I should be told everything concerning our family and its honour. Now look at the mess you’ve landed yourself in....”

“I’m in no mess, as you call it, father. I admit Mr. Boake told me that Prank was blackmailing him. I told him to let me go to the police. He said he daren’t risk it. I insisted. I told him we were interested parties as well as him and that I was going to tell the whole thing to the police....”

“Why didn’t you, my boy?”

“Because Boake made me promise not to until he’d had time to think it over. I said I’d call again the next day. Meantime, Prank died and, as far as I was concerned, was past doing us any harm.”

“But weren’t you anxious about the letters?” interjected Littlejohn.

“Why should I be? If they were found in Prank’s effects, probably they’d have been returned. I intended having a word with our lawyer, only ...”

“Only?”

“I was busy and hadn’t the time.... I ...”

“I suggest to you that Lee called here with the letters and tried to sell them to you...”

“I never heard such damned nonsense in my life! What should Lee know of them?”

“Prank owed Lee money and left them with him for safe-keeping or security. After Prank died, I suggest Lee tried a bit of blackmail himself. He tried to get at Boake, too, but was refused admission to the hospital. So he came here, didn’t he?”

“Don’t get me mad, Inspector. Nothing of the kind happened. He called here, as I said before, after blackmarket stuff ...”

“George!” Saul Emmott intervened. “I know by your manner you’re not telling the truth. I insist you tell the Inspector why Lee called here and whether the letters were mentioned. We’ve made enough mystery of this affair as it is. I don’t want any more of it.”

“Very well. If you want it, father. He did mention the letters. I told him to go to hell. Apparently he took my advice. I said at the same time that the police would hear of it the following day. And I haven’t an alibi for that, Inspector. Because he seemed to go right from here and get himself run over on the bridge. You mentioned double murder. I take it Lee was number two. You don’t suggest, do you, that I chased after him and ran him down? I’d have wrung his neck, not made a road accident of him, if I’d thought him worth killing.”

“And now ... Is there anything more?”

The old man was getting restive.

“Just one other thing. You, Mr. Emmott, were indoors when these two deaths occurred?”

“And who do you suggest accompanied me, carried or wheeled me to the scene of the crime, and supported me while I did it? You know, I can’t move a step of my own volition. Why question me?”

“Just a matter of form, sir.”

“I was in bed. I go at nine every night.”

“Thank you, sir. And Miss Nancy? Where was she?” George looked from his father to Littlejohn angrily.

“Why drag my sister into it? She goes to bed about ten every night. She was in bed when Prank died. I left her in bed when I went out.”

“And when Lee died?”

“She was here. I can vouch for that.”

“Can she drive a car?”

“Yes. But what’s that got to do with it ...? Oh, I see. She might have gone after Lee. It’s time you got to the end of this nonsense, Inspector.”

“I was just thinking the same myself, Mr. Emmott. I’ll keep you from your threshing no longer. Good day to you both and my thanks to Miss Emmott when she recovers.”

Littlejohn was badly nettled by the turn affairs had taken at Headlands Farm. His enquiries there had confused the issue more than ever. He walked slowly back to town turning things over. He even sat on a stile and tried to sort out the tangle the case had become.

Then, suddenly, there descended on him a theory which took his breath away. At first, he tried to push it out of his mind, but the more he thought about it, the more insistent became the idea.

He knocked out his pipe and hastened back to the police station whilst the mood was hot upon him.

XIX

THE TWO PHILANDERERS

IT was getting late when Littlejohn started out to round-off his day's work by two more enquiries. He refused to eat a high-tea at the hotel next door to the police station. The most they could persuade him to take was a cup of tea and a bun which tasted to be made of sawdust and looked like a small firelighter. As the Inspector took this doubtful refreshment, Hoggatt turned up his records.

"You remember telling me about George Emmott assaulting someone for mentioning his sister in a pub? Can you find out who the victim was?" Littlejohn had said.

The best records turned out to be in the form of cuttings from the local newspaper. There was an account of a scuffle in the "Red Lion" smoke-room and then, suddenly, the case was dropped.

"Oh, yes. I remember it all now," exclaimed Hoggatt. "It was Bertie Tanner, one of the solicitors here and clerk to the local magistrates. That's why the case was dropped. He didn't prosecute Emmott. It would have looked a bit funny in his own court and probably there'd have been some dirty linen washed in public...."

"Where does Tanner live?"

"You turn to the left outside here and go right on...."

Hoggatt drew a sketch map on his blotting-pad.

"Does Winterbottom, the vet., live anywhere near there?"

"It's on your way. Instead of going straight up the hill...."

There followed more directions.

"I doubt if you'll find him in, though. It's past surgery hours. However, he lives on the premises, so you might be lucky."

Littlejohn was lucky. He entered by a large gate bearing Winterbottom's name, qualifications and surgery hours and found himself in a wide, cobbled yard. On one side, a number of loose boxes and on the other, judging from the yapping and snarling going on behind the closed doors, the kennels. Littlejohn wondered how the neighbours put up with the noise all

day. The door of a new detached brick building with glass roof-lights and labelled *Surgery* stood open and the Inspector made for it.

Littlejohn must have come upon the scene very quietly under cover of the barking of dogs, for he surprised the occupants of the workshop. A tubby, bandy-legged middle-aged fellow in riding-breeches and a tweed coat was with busy hands fondling a buxom red-cheeked girl with carrot hair and dressed in a soiled white smock. These seemed to be the preliminaries to more serious operations, for a puppy lay pathetically asleep under an anaesthetic on the operating table and there were instruments close at hand. The pair sprang apart, but the girl stayed and brazened it out.

“What do *you* want?” snapped Winterbottom, turning a bloated face with shifty alcoholic eyes on Littlejohn. “Surgery hours are over.”

Littlejohn passed over his card and Bandylegs’ red face grew several shades paler.

“I’m busy,” he muttered. “Just ready to operate on the dog. Won’t it do another time?”

“I won’t keep you a minute, Mr. Winterbottom.”

“Come in here, then.”

They left the kennel-maid and entered an untidy lean-to which served as an office. The place stank of whisky and carbolic.

“Have a drink?”

The vet. poured himself a stiff one and poised the bottle over another soiled glass.

“No thanks.”

“Mind if I have one?”

Before Littlejohn could express an opinion one way or the other, the man had drained it.

“That’s better. Now, sir. What can I do for you?”

He seemed to be expecting trouble of some kind. He was so relieved when he heard what the Inspector wanted, that he downed another stiff peg to celebrate. Littlejohn felt sorry for the puppy awaiting vivisection.

“Yes. I was at the Emmotts’ at the time you mention. Tough job with a young heifer.... But we pulled her through. Fine calf, too. Yes, George walked just over the bridge with me. I didn’t take the car. You understand ... petrol shortage. Got to save a bit when we can. Sure you won’t have a drink? Mind if I have one, then?”

“You’re sure about the time, sir?”

“Quite sure....” Winterbottom was owlish about it. “Qui’ sh-shure. As matter of fact ... there was some sort of a shemozzle going on at the bridge. Fellow fallen in. Turned out later been *pushed* in. We’d to wait at the turnstile quite a bit. Little squirt of a chap on duty fished the poor blighter out of the water. ’Sfar as I can say ... approx.... about ... just before eleven. Yes ... just before eleven.”

“And where did you leave Mr. Emmott?”

“Look here, old man. Whass all this about? You don’t think I did Sam Prank in, do you? Because if you do, George Emmott’ll give me cast-iron alibi. He left me at the old bridge. I wen’ one way; he wen’ the other. They’d got the body out by then and we’d been together for two hours before that. I don’ see the sense of all this, ole man....”

“Neither do I, sir. I’m sorry to butt-in. Good night.”

“Good night, Inspector. Got to get back to the pup. Detest pups ... detest dogs.... Gimme a good cow or a horse any ole day....”

The red-headed girl had evidently finished with the dog during the interview for she was bandaging its abdomen as the Inspector passed out.

“Good night,” she shouted after Littlejohn, as bold as you please.

Winterbottom approached her solicitously for another spasm of canoodling, judging from the look in his eye....

Mr. Bertie Tanner was different. He lived in bachelor quarters in the best part of the town. A manservant ushered Littlejohn into a fine oak-panelled room and asked him to wait. A contrast to the sordid quarters he had just left. Expensive carpets on the floor, sumptuous furniture and good pictures. Opulent-looking leather-bound books in closed book-cases. The smell of a good cigar penetrating the place. Real comfort and not a wrong note. Mr. Tanner quickly followed the aroma of his cigar. A small, dapper man, with a toothbrush of a moustache and going bald in front. A thin face with well-chiselled features and a big nose. His well-cut clothes didn’t bear the stamp of a small-town tailor.

Tanner started being hospitable at once. “Cigar? Whisky? Or would you prefer beer, Inspector?”

“No thank you, sir. I’ll smoke my pipe if you don’t mind.”

“Fire away. Tobacco?”

Littlejohn said he preferred his own. It was a nightmare ploughing through the courtesies before getting down to business.

“Well, and what can I do for you, Inspector?”

Tanner turned a pair of sad, puzzled eyes on Littlejohn. There were pouches under them which gave him a doglike expression.

It was difficult breaking the ice. The man was so self-possessed and well poised.

“Well, sir. It’s rather awkward.... I’m on the Prank murder case and I’m checking-up on one or two people connected with Prank. Among others is George Emmott.... No doubt you know him?”

“Rather....”

Tanner actually chuckled. There was evidently some humour beneath the trim exterior.

“Well, sir, excuse my bluntness but didn’t he once give you a ... didn’t he once assault you in a local hotel?”

“I’m glad you didn’t say gave me a hiding. Matter of fact, he did set about me. He could give me a stone or two, but I knew how to use my fists better than he did. If they hadn’t separated us, I’d probably have knocked Emmott for six. Is that all you’re after?”

“Well, no, sir. I want to know what the row was about, if you please.”

“How in the world can that affect the Prank murder? However, you know your own business best and it’s my duty as an officer of the court to help all I can. Sure you won’t have a drink?”

Littlejohn would have some beer, then, thank you. The manservant brought in a bottle and glass and poured out the beer, at the same time serving his master with whisky.

“You know, Inspector, you’re digging into my personal and murky past. It concerns a bit of a love affair of mine and I don’t mind telling you I’m not very happy in reviving the details of it. However ...”

Tanner shrugged his shoulders and pulled at his cigar.

“Well then, sir. What was the quarrel about?”

“It was about Emmott’s sister, Nancy. Now this is in strictest confidence, Inspector. That is, within the requirements of your investigation, you’ll be discreet. After all, it’s not playing the game bandying a woman’s name about ...”

“This isn’t cricket, sir; it’s murder....”

Tanner carefully knocked the ash from his cigar into a brass bowl.

"I'm quite aware of that. Otherwise ..."

He shrugged his shoulders again.

"I was a bit keen on Miss Emmott once. In fact, we were almost engaged. She was, and is, a very lovely girl. But ..."

"But nothing came of it, sir?"

"No. Nothing came of it."

"Might I press you to be more explicit, sir? Believe me, it's not idle curiosity. Was it a quarrel ...? Did you end it? Or did she?"

"I can see, Inspector, that you know as much about it as I do. But I'll tell you. I had to end it..."

Littlejohn sighed and took a drink of his beer. Things were moving as he'd expected.

"Why, sir?"

"You put me in a very awkward position, Inspector. As clerk to the Bench here, it's my duty to help you. As a gentleman, however, I ought to keep quiet. Justice triumphs—*fiat justitia ruat coelum*, eh? So ... I broke with Nancy Emmott because I found out, quite unexpectedly, that we couldn't make a go of it. Marriage was impossible. You see, there's insanity in the Emmott family. Saul Emmott's younger brother is in the county asylum to this day. George's elder brother shot himself. Not many people know of it. Saul's brother was said to be delicate and in a private home; his son's death was passed-off as an accident. That information is from George himself. He let it out some time ago in his cups. Of course, it soon got all over the town."

"How did you get squabbling with George, sir?"

"Well ... Miss Emmott and I had a quarrel. One of those trifling things young folk usually have and make-up, you know. But her behaviour then was extraordinary. She grew almost violent. The signs seemed so ominous, that I had to watch my step. I wasn't so much infatuated that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with a woman who went so violently off at the deep-end as that. I had to be quite sure whether or not it was just temper, hysterics, you know, ... or ... well ... the other thing."

"And it was ...?"

"Well, of course, as I said, there's mania in the family. I don't say Nancy's potty.... Far from it. But I just couldn't take the risk of marrying

her in the circumstances. We parted company. And neither of us was heartbroken. We got over it. She's had quite a number of followers since, but nothing seems to have come of it. A brother lawyer of mine was saying one night at the "Red Lion" what a fine girl she was. He'd had one over the eight and was a bit coarse about it. I'd seen George Emmott come in and so I turned to my friend and told him it wasn't the thing to talk about a girl in a place like that.... Then, before I knew what was happening, George was at my throat. Worse than Nancy by a long way. Absolutely raving mad.... Shouting something about dragging his sister's name in the mud and such tommyrot. As if *I'd* started it all.... Well, you know the rest, Inspector."

"Yes, sir. I appreciate your help, especially the confidences you've given. I think I'm safe in saying the information will go no farther. It just confirms an idea of mine and I can now go ahead with a greater sense of security."

"I see.... You can't tell me more? I'd be most interested to know."

"I'm sorry, sir. This is pure theory I'm working on and until I've something more solid, I can't tell a soul."

"I see.... Well, I suppose if you're right the affair will be aired in my court. I must be patient, I guess. Will you have another glass of beer ...?"

Tanner had lost some of his poise. He was perhaps wondering what Littlejohn thought of him. The lover who studied his beloved's family history and health record before popping the question! He had often wondered whether it was an inherited weakness or whether most women went off at the deep end like Nancy whenever they were crossed and got their men alone. At any rate, his mother had led his father a dog's life. Bertie Tanner had remained a bachelor and a bit of a recluse ever since.

The lawyer was fumbling for words of dismissal and parting.

Littlejohn refused further refreshment, bade Tanner good night and as the front door closed, suddenly felt light-headed. Surely, one glass of beer wouldn't ... A clock struck half-past nine. Littlejohn remembered that he hadn't eaten since noon.

XX

INDISCRETION OF MERCY

LITTLEJOHN was on the job good and early the following morning. There remained two or three final links in the chain of his theory and then he would test it. When he and Cromwell had left Werrymouth on the previous night, the Inspector had dismissed the case from his mind and turned to the pleasures of Playfair's company. It was better so, he always found.

The first port of call was the Samaritan again. Littlejohn had an important question to ask Kissack.

"You remember telling me that Miss Emmott and her brother called to see Mr. Boake one day last week, Kissack?"

"Yes, sir. They did."

The porter looked surprised that his evidence should be in doubt.

"You said, too, that Miss Emmott went up to the ward first with flowers and then came down and sent her brother up. Whilst her brother was in the ward, was Miss Emmott outside in the van, or did she go back with him? Think carefully."

"I saw her come down and fetch him from the van, sir. Then I saw Mr. Emmott come in and go upstairs alone. I was called away then, so I couldn't say if she follored him later."

"I see. I'd better speak to the Sister of that ward. Could I go up ...? It's the girl with red hair I want."

"Sister Thomas? Yes. If you go up, you'll find her somewhere along the corridor. I can't leave my place just at present. It's out-patients' time, you see...."

Littlejohn made off to the private patients' annexe, where he had previously met Boake. He found Sister Thomas making her rounds of inspection, accompanied by a girl with a trolley laden with bottles, trays, clinical thermometers and other paraphernalia. The girl with red hair looked as bright and fresh as could be. Probably temperatures went down for the better or up for the worse when she entered the rooms, according to the complaint and sex of the patient!

“Are you still here, Inspector?” she said. “I thought you’d have been done long ago. Yes, Miss Emmott followed her brother to poor Mr. Boake’s room, I know. I couldn’t allow them both in, so I asked her to wait in the passage.”

“Was the door open?”

“It would be. You see, we have felt pads hanging from all the door-knobs and we wedge the doors ajar with them. We don’t like patients to be altogether shut in. Then again, constantly slamming doors annoys and disturbs patients. Yes. The door would be at least ajar.”

“Thank you very much, Sister. This is my last visit, I hope, so I’ll bid you goodbye.”

The nurse bustled off to her next case and Littlejohn left the hospital and made for Headlands Farm. He was working to schedule and hoped to catch Nancy and George away. It was cattle-market day and he had discovered that they invariably came to town then, George to watch the auctioning and perhaps buy a beast when he fancied one; Nancy to do the weekly shopping. The constable on the old bridge beat had been told to keep his eyes open for their passing in the car. Sure enough, he had a report for Littlejohn as the Inspector went by. They had crossed the bridge about ten minutes ago.

Littlejohn had made no fixed plan concerning what he would do once he reached the farm. His main idea was to find out what the Emmotts had been doing when Lee was killed and if Nancy really was in bed, as George had said, when Prank met his death. Further, were the letters which had caused the deaths of Prank, Lee and Boake still in existence and hidden about the place, or had they been destroyed?

Who was going to help him in his researches he did not know. Quite impossible to question Old Emmott again. It depended on one of the farm hands—two of them slept over the stables—or on Mercy, the maid of all work.

Mercy, it appeared was a faithful old retainer of the family and had been with them for forty years or more, ever since old Mrs. Emmott had taken her from some orphanage or other. Littlejohn had no stomach for quizzing old servants who didn’t know properly the significance of what they were saying. He had vividly in mind the famous case in which one of his

predecessors at Scotland Yard had obtained information from an old maid which nearly hanged the young master she adored.

Still, it had to be done.... It was a question of murder and Lord knew where it would stop if the criminal wasn't found.

Luckily, Mercy was crossing the farmyard with a bucket of pig-swill again. She seemed to have a soft spot in her heart for the pigs. Littlejohn joined her as she teemed the mess into the troughs. She turned and jumped with surprise when she found him at her elbow.

"What do you want again? There's nobody at home but the master...."

"A pity. I've had a journey in vain again. That's a nice lot of pigs you've got there."

Mercy's solemn little wedge-shaped face relaxed. She even smiled in her fashion by tightening her lips until they vanished into her mouth.

"Very fine, they are. I looks after 'em myself."

"That chap there with the black markings is a beauty...."

"He's mine, he is. Master gave 'im to me when he was born. Fine pork he'll make come Christmas. I'll sell 'im and the money'll be mine, 'though I'll cry my eyes out when it comes his time for the butcher. You see the other one by him?"

"Yes. Almost as big?"

"Not by a pound or two. That's the vicar's pig. Leastways, it's in his name. Really belongs to the pig club at the church. Proper fond of Thomas—that's what he called the pig—is the vicar. Comes regular to see 'im, just as if he might be a member of the church. What'll happen when it comes Thomas's turn for the butcher, I don't know. What you laughing at?"

"It struck me funny. My name's Thomas, too."

"Is it now. Well, nothing to be ashamed havin' a pig called the same. I *like* pigs, I do. Always good tempered and a smile for you when you brings them their meat.... Better than 'umans is pigs, to my way of thinkin'."

"I thought you were very fond of the family.... The Emmotts, I mean."

Mercy began to draw in her horns. She gave Littlejohn a suspicious glance, and nervously chewed her cheeks.

"I *am* fond o' the fambly. Nobody can say I'm not. I been with them more than forty years. Forty-four years, come Martinmas, Mrs. Emmott took me out o' St. Bride's orphanage...."

"You've been faithful then, Mercy."

"I have that. Saw all four children in the world. Was here when Mr. Leonard died and Mr. Henry went to sea in a temper. And Mrs. Emmott died in my arms and me picking the master up, too, when he had his seizure...."

"You've been one of the family, haven't you?"

"Yes. Though sometimes now you wouldn't think so. Since they've grown-up, the children've no time for their old Mercy. Too busy with their own devices, they are.... Except Miss Nancy. She's always good to me."

"You were nurse to them as well, then?"

"Yes. Nursed 'em all. A fine handful they was, too. And the tempers they had. All. high-spirited. Specially Miss Nancy. As pretty as a picture, but as unbiddable as could be if she didn't get what she wanted. The things she'd do. I could go on tellin' you things all mornin'. But I must be off. The master'll give me the length of his tongue if he finds I've been gossiping here...."

She picked up her bucket and prepared to go.

"You've had happy days, too, I guess," went on Littlejohn, as if he hadn't heard.

"Oh yes. I lie in bed at nights before I go to sleep and remember 'em. They've all gone, now, but I remember 'em. I was the special friend of the children. Let me into all their secrets, they did. I usedter know their hiding-places when they wanted not to be found, and where each of 'em hid their special toys and sweets so's the rest couldn't get them.... They don't tell me secrets any more...."

"I'll bet Nancy had a good place, Mercy. She strikes me'as clever as she's pretty. Not all good looks and no brains...."

"Oh yes, she was a deep 'un. I'd rather have the boys myself, in those days. Nancy's good looks hid a cunnin' brain, I always said. Nobody but me ever knew her hidey-hole. More crafty than the boys, who put things in woodpecker holes in trees, or on top of the bookcase, or under the loose boards in the floor. You'd never guess *her's*."

"She told you, it seems...."

"No. I just 'appened to catch her at it one day. But she never knew I seen 'er. That was long ago and she don't need hidey-holes now. They go to the bank with their valuables."

“Where was this hide-out? I’m interested in such things. You know ... inquisitive....”

“I’ll tell you. Do nobody any harm, now. All them days are gone. It usedter be in the old oven in the bakehouse. That building there. Used as a wood-shed, now. But in the old days when farm-folk made their own bread, there usedter be baking days twice a week in there. Before my time, it was. The old oven’s still there and there was a loose brick in the side of it. She’d found it and hollowed it out more and kept sweets and such like things she wanted for herself in it....”

“Very cunning.... Surprising how children think out these things....”

“You’d be surprised if I told you all the things those four did when they was little. I must go.... I’ll get in trouble. I’ve not started the dinner, yet....”

“Well, I’ll have to call again, Mercy. By the way, I wanted to ask Miss Emmott if she was out last Saturday night about half-past ten. Do you happen to know?”

Mercy gave him another sidelong suspicious glance.

“I don’t know anythin’. I go to bed at nine and I sleep when I get there. I don’t bother my brains with what goes on downstairs after that. I’m going. I spent too much time talking with you as it is.”

She floundered off across the yard and vanished into the kitchen. Littlejohn lit his pipe and surveyed the place. There was another gate beyond the farmhouse which would give access to the old bakery, he thought, and thus avoid his passing the windows of the kitchen occupied by Saul Emmott and the maid. He left the farmyard and made his way along the road. It was as he had thought. He slipped through the gate and entered the woodshed. The oven, its door rusty but solid still and ajar, was large enough to admit a considerable batch of bread. Littlejohn eased it open.

The aperture contained a motley assortment of things. Beansticks, a long, rusty poker and even an old muzzleloading gun. The Inspector shone his torch along the dark interior. Two flashing eyes gleamed from the depths. A little she-cat with kittens! Instinctively scenting a friendly intruder, the cat settled again and began to purr.

Hastily Littlejohn felt for the loose tile. He was not long in finding and removing it. He groped in the cavity and grunted with satisfaction. A packet and a bulky object were there. The light of day confirmed what Littlejohn

had already guessed from touch. Boake's letters and an ugly length of rubber piping!

The Inspector had scarcely pocketed his finds, when old Mercy appeared at the door. She was after wood for her cooking.

She squealed with surprise and dismay.

"I thought I'd see the place you described for myself," he said.

"You shouldn't 'ave. You shouldn't 'ave," was all the poor woman could say."

"Well, I must be off, Mercy.... Goodbye. Most interesting."

Littlejohn didn't like it at all. He couldn't for the life of him say to the old servant that she was not to tell the family. That would be silly and futile to one so wrapped-up in her old charges and faithful to them. She'd tell them in any case. Unless ... unless she was afraid of getting into trouble for gossiping. It was bad enough to have to obtain incriminating information from the old girl at all. But it was the only way apparently.

Littlejohn hurried downhill to the town. He was anxious to get his find examined and a warrant issued before Mercy had time to warn the family. As soon as Nancy and George returned from town, the fat would be in the fire.

He would arrange for Hoggatt to put a watch on the farm until the police called to play the final round.

XXI

AT THE VILLA CARLOTTA

P.C. PILKINGTON, assigned to the task of watching Emmotts' Farm, was highly nervous about the job. He had been chosen because he was an officer of a little more than the average intelligence and because he'd been the only policeman in plain clothes at the time one was wanted.

He had his bicycle with him in case there was any attempted getaway by road. The hill from Headlands to the old bridge was steep enough to ensure his getting up sufficient velocity to keep up with any car. He took a roundabout route and hid himself in some bushes with a full view of both the gates of the farm.

Pilkington kept asking himself what he must do if any of the parties concerned tried to run away. Littlejohn had told him to watch for the arrival of the Emmotts from town and then see that they didn't get out of his sight until the Inspector had had time to interview them.

At shortly after one o'clock, George and Nancy returned in the van and went indoors for lunch. Had Pilkington only known, he could have stood at ease for an hour, for Mercy was so busy dishing up the brussels sprouts and potatoes that she hadn't time for a private word with her mistress. It was after lunch, at about two o'clock, that the maid told Nancy of Littlejohn's visit and that she had seen him exploring in the woodshed.

Poor Mercy daren't look her mistress in the eyes as she confessed the time she had wasted during her absence. It is perhaps as well she did not, for the awful look in those blue depths, which assumed an almost glacial green, a fixed, malevolent stare, would have kept her awake with terror for many a night afterwards. George coming suddenly upon them in conversation spoke earnestly to his sister, for he seemed puzzled by her attitude and then, finding Nancy fixed in thought, shrugged his shoulders and went to talk to his father.

Nancy Emmott remained frozen for a mere minute. Then she sidled out and inspected the oven in the woodshed. The cat emerged, as was her custom, to rub against her mistress's hand and was, instead, seized by the

scruff of the neck and madly hurled on a pile of faggots. The little thing picked herself up and sprang into the oven to defend her kittens.... But Nancy was already in her bedroom.

Alternately panting from her exertions and laughing softly and without humour to herself, she packed a blouse-case and stuffed money in her handbag. Father and son below were discussing market affairs from the morning and the coast was clear.

Pilkington saw the girl emerge stealthily from the front door, enter the cart-shed and start the van. Then she climbed in and made off for town. The constable mounted his bike and followed.

“What the ...? Where’s Nancy off to ...?”

George Emmott had spotted the van emerging from the shed.

“She’s got luggage with ’er,” called Mercy, from the swill-tub by the door....

So, as Littlejohn and Hoggatt drove uphill in the police car, they met a frantic procession coming down.

Nancy driving the van hell-for-leather. Then Pilkington, who flashed anguishedly past them without even seeing them. Finally came George on his motor-cycle following the others.

Hoggatt turned in the next gateway and joined the parade.

“She must be making for the station. There’s a train to London at two-forty. She’ll manage to get it, if we don’t stop her.”

P.C. Pilkington lost ground on the level just before the old bridge and had to pedal furiously. George Emmott overtook him and followed the van to the parking ground in front of the hospital. There Nancy drew up, for she had sighted her brother through the mirror and had an idea of evading him in the maze of side-streets between the car park and the station. As George flung himself from his machine and approached the van, Nancy sprang out, met him and dealt him a savage blow with a spanner. He reeled and losing his balance, fell headlong just as Littlejohn and Hoggatt drove into view.

Between the station and the hospital at Werrymouth lies a warren of narrow, mean streets and into these plunged Nancy. Hoggatt, Littlejohn and Pilkington, dividing forces, entered after her and it was Littlejohn who suddenly found himself on her heels. She was emerging from a narrow alley leading to the promenade, in the middle of which lies Werrymouth Central Station.

It needed a minute or two to the time for the London train and there was only the Villa Carlotta between Nancy and the station.

By this time, the girl was completely demented. All she thought of was the train and freedom. Anyone who tried to stop her would suffer for it. It never entered her head that she hadn't the remotest chance of escape. The machinery of the law was now ranged full stretch against her and her position was hopeless. She turned the corner to pass the front of the Villa Carlotta and saw approaching, from the opposite corner, her brother George who, in spite of the blow, had pulled himself together and was still stumbling protectively after her.... Littlejohn's feet hurried relentlessly behind. The crowds on the promenade turned to get a good view of the scene. They didn't know the parties, so hesitated to take sides, until Hoggatt appeared running from another side-street. Then they suddenly realised there was a hue-and-cry and started to shout and mill around. Mr. Penrose, the baker who had confessed at the revival meeting to giving short weight, had been left in the lurch by his customers since, and stood before a shopful of unsold bread, biliously watching the hullabaloo.

The Villa Carlotta is the municipal concert hall of Werrymouth. In the year it was built the Mayor of Werrymouth had been on a ten days' Hankey's Tour to the Italian Lakes and there had met the lady who became his second wife. Nothing would do but that the new hall should be named after the meeting place. He had wanted to change the name to The Winter Gardens a few months afterwards but the Council wouldn't have it. In front of this building Nancy Emmott was cornered. She turned in through the front entrance in the hope of dodging her pursuers.

That afternoon, there was a classical concert in the Villa Carlotta. The orchestra, conducted by Sir Wenceslaus Trimble, were going at it hammer-and-tongs in the third movement of Brahms First Piano Concerto and Henry Weinberg was in full spate at the piano. In the hall were gathered Lady Bromiloe and her retinue of social rabbits, including Sir Sebastian Bromiloe who was already asleep. Her ladyship was trying to appear to be in a trance of ecstasy, so the rest of her following were not whispering under cover of the music as they usually did when she was absent from such gatherings, but endeavouring to look wrapt and intelligent.

"Can't h'enter till the piece is finished," said a man in a red uniform to Nancy as she tried the baize-covered door of the stalls. She sped up the next

flight of stairs to the circle. Littlejohn just saw her disappearing round the curve of the staircase and followed.

Muffled music punctuated the pursuit. Littlejohn, bounding upwards, found it difficult to believe the business was real. It was like a fantastic dream, a silly symphony with full musical effects.

Uniformed flunkeys with the same officious zeal, like angels at the gates of heaven, forbade entrance to the upper circle until Sir Wenceslaus had ceased his frantic thrashing of the air. So Nancy ascended yet another staircase. This time narrow, uncarpeted, resounding, leading to the passage round the great dome of the hall. She did not know why she continued to climb. Flight was in her brain and heels and so long as she fled, she was free. She never thought to turn at bay, until, passing through a small door at the top of the steps, she found herself looking down into the thronged hall, like a goddess in heaven surveying a human anthill.

Littlejohn appeared in the doorway a few seconds later. Nancy Emmott turned wildly and saw him. Then she laughed and gestured like a child in high glee. There was nothing for Littlejohn to do but to approach her....

Gosling, the horn-player, first saw what was going on. During a few bars rest, he opened the valve, ejected a stream of moisture from his instrument and cast his eyes idly to the dome. He turned pale and prodded his twin horn-blower in the ribs. Snape followed his eyes and recoiled. Just then, the fist of Sir Wenceslaus was flung in their direction for an entrance, but no horns sounded. Instead, there was a scream, high above the throbbing orchestra, a rush as of wings, and the awful thud of a falling body in the aisle near where Lady Bromiloe was sitting. Her Ladyship turned a disdainful eye in the direction of the disturbance, and immediately slid unconscious to the ground....

Littlejohn stood for a moment dazed on his high perch. Below, it looked like an anthill which someone has vigorously poked with a stick. He tottered through the door to safety and was surprised to find that he was still holding his pipe between his teeth. By the time he reached ground level, they had cleared up the scene of the tragedy and removed the body. The audience was dispersing in awestricken silence and Lady Bromiloe was being supported to her car.

"Disgusting disturbance," the musical critic of the *Werrymouth Trumpet* was saying, and picking up his straw hat, he put it on his head with such

force and venom that it seemed that the crown would give way and the brim slide over his ears to his neck. He had a reputation for being a bit crazy, though.

XXII

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

"I must see you this evening and discuss matters. I wish you to come alone, as what I have to say, although concerning this afternoon's happenings, is not everybody's business."

The note from Saul Emmott, brought by a farm lad on a bicycle, was like a royal command.

After the tragedy at the Villa Carlotta, George had asked to be allowed to break the news himself to his father. The police, out of consideration for the old man's health and age, had agreed and had not again visited the farm. This they proposed to do on the morrow, after old Emmott had had chance to recover a bit.

Now, here he was writing in peremptory fashion and commanding the Inspector's presence.

"I guess he wants it all cleared up at once and will be able to tell you something about why the girl committed the crimes. He *must* have known her condition and been shielding her as long as he could. Now he's anxious to get it off his conscience...."

Hoggatt had it all pat. Cromwell, who was with them at the police station, however, was not so sure. There was a worried look in Littlejohn's eye which told one who knew him well that he wasn't altogether satisfied with things. On the face of it, the case was as clear as daylight. Prank had left Nancy for another girl and had had the cheek to try to cash-in on letters written to her by her best friend. Her mind, always delicately balanced, had become totally unhinged and she had killed Prank and his associate. What more was there to it? Probably after the Chief had seen the old man, he would feel better and the case would be clear.

"I've a call to make before I go up to Headlands. The pair of you had better follow me in about half-an-hour and post yourselves in the bushes in front of the farm. I'll whistle you up if I need you."

They didn't like the look on Littlejohn's face as he said it.

“Why?” asked Hoggatt. “Do you think the old man and young George will cut-up rough when you tell them what they’re wanting to know?”

“I don’t know, Hoggatt. But I’d be happier if you were both at hand.”

“Of course, we’ll be there.” Cromwell and Hoggatt said it in chorus.

Littlejohn, on his way, made a call at the veterinary surgeon’s again. Winterbottom was out, as usual, and the kennel-girl was in charge. So the Inspector had a word or two with her, instead. She was quite open about what he asked her, but he left her with her healthy cheeks a shade redder than natural.

At the farm, Mercy was hanging over the door of the pig-stye again. Deep silence, except for the snorting and munching of cattle and the musical ring of a bucket as somebody started milking, hung over the place. All the blinds were drawn. A column of smoke rose upright from the kitchen chimney.

“I’ve just been telling the pigs about it all. They’re the only ones who want to listen to me.”

Tears were running down Mercy’s cheeks.

“You can tell me,” said Littlejohn quietly. He asked the old servant a number of sympathetic questions, too, about Nancy and the way she’d lived and behaved during recent months.

In the distance, he could make out the sturdy forms of Cromwell and Hoggatt winding up the hill.

He knocked out his pipe against the wall of the stye.

“You might tell Mr. Emmott I’m here, will you, Mercy? He wanted to see me.”

Although the body was in the town morgue, death hung over the house like a pall.

Saul Emmott was in his usual chair by the fire, his silky grey hair shining in the dim light, his head erect. George was sitting on the long oak settle. They looked like wooden images.

“Thank you for coming, Inspector. I want to get this over...”

The old man was the first to speak. His voice was clear and he was fully master of himself and his emotions. George said nothing.

“I’m very sorry, sir...”

Littlejohn was lost for words.

“You only did your duty, Inspector...”

“Damn and blast you all and your meddling ...!”

“George!”

It was like a stern word of command to an unruly schoolboy.

“George has told me everything, Inspector. I felt you ought to know exactly what has occurred. I have been kept in the dark far too long.... Things might have been otherwise had I been told what was happening.”

There was no bitterness in the tone; just weariness.

“It will be far better if I tell you all there is to tell and then the matter can drop.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather defer it a bit, sir? I know it has been a great shock.... If you feel ...”

“I said I wanted to get it done with. I will tell you the story as I’ve heard it from George. He seems too confused to tell a lucid tale himself....”

George gave his father an appealing look. It was evident he had been told exactly what he must do. The head of the house was going to be its spokesman.

“Nancy was always a highly-strung girl. As a baby, she had one or two illnesses which left her nerves shaken and any excitement always became too much for her and made her unmanageable....”

Nothing about the family taint of insanity, thought Littlejohn.

“You know yourself what a pretty girl she was. Half the boys in town ... well ...”

The old man’s pride glowed from his eyes. It was pathetic to see him fumbling among his memories.

“She was friendly with one or two of them. In fact, once or twice we thought something would come of it, but somehow.... She was hard to please. Yes, hard to please. Like her mother....”

George glanced at his father as though wondering when he was going to get down to facts.

“Then that scoundrel Prank came along. What she could see in him, I don’t know. He was at school with her and that gave him a certain acquaintance with her, I guess. He was an adventurer, couldn’t settle, ran away to sea, came back, and generally upset his family and everybody else. He had a dashing sort of way with him. Perhaps you’d call it a sailor’s way. At any rate, he started waiting about in town on the off-chance of meeting Nancy. He captured her fancy and she’d been meeting him when he got in

port for months before George caught them and warned Prank what he'd do...."

George was wanting to see the last of Littlejohn and showed signs of impatience.

"He must have called here," he interrupted, "for he managed to steal a packet of letters and a snapshot of Nancy which she kept hidden in a hiding-place of her own in the old bakehouse. She must even have told him about that, although she prided herself on the secret...."

"When you've quite finished, George. I was coming to that ... Well, to resume. Sam cooled-off. He'd found some other girl on his travels and stopped meeting Nancy. When she realised what had happened, she wilted like a fading flower. You could see her changing. In fact, the scoundrel broke her heart and the worry got on her nerves. Then, apparently in financial straits, he tried to sell the letters he'd stolen...."

"Mr. Boake's letters, sir?"

"Yes. Poor Boake had a rough time at home. He married a wife quite unsuitable who bullied him fearfully and made his life a misery. She loved to show him up in public and he, who was used to ruling at the school with a rod of iron, had to kiss his wife's rod whenever she chose to make him. It's hard to understand, isn't it, how a woman can get such a grip on a man? He ought to have chastised her, but he was too much of a gentleman."

"You were saying about the letters, sir."

"I'm coming to it. There is a period in life when even staid and respectable men sometimes do silly things. Boake, who had sought refuge here, must have found his lost youth in Nancy, I think, for he seems to have gone through a phase of loving her in his decent, gentle way. During a school holiday when he was away from Werrymouth doing work in London for a charity he was interested in, he wrote what must have been love letters to my girl. Nobody but Nancy saw them and I understand you have them now. I trust you will treat them with discretion and respect for those dead ones whom they alone concern."

"You may rest assured of that, sir."

"She seems to have valued them and kept them. Boake got over the phase and continued as our friend. Nancy was in love with Prank then, so she didn't respond to the sentiments of the letters. Those it was that Prank stole. He called on Boake at school and obtained money from him and that

spent, even called at the hospital for more. He left poor Boake almost demented. So much so that he confided in George here, who told him to tell the police and that if he didn't, George would. Nancy, who was outside the sick-room, must have overheard and learned that Prank would be on the quay waiting for the money at the fatal hour. She was there instead, and you know what happened."

"And what about Mr. George's movements on that night, sir?"

Littlejohn turned from the old man to his son.

"I called for my coat, as I wanted to see Winterbottom on his way," answered George, eagerly like an actor as the cue is given. "I found Nancy's room empty. I guessed what had happened and, making the excuse of needing a change of air, I went the whole way to the quay with the vet. As you know, the evil had been done then. When I got home, Nancy was in bed. She had obviously been up to something, for she was so excited and strange. I thought she might lose her senses altogether if I taxed her with the crime. So I left it at that and did my best to protect her...."

The old man, not to be outdone, took up the tale.

"Then the scoundrel Lee arrived here. He talked about chickens and eggs to us, but getting Nancy to herself, mentioned the letters. She must have struck him down in fury and done him to death in her rage...."

"You mean, she rendered him unconscious by a blow of some kind, loaded him in the car and took him down to the bridge and ran over him!"

The old man bowed his head.

"What else? I was in bed and didn't hear the car. George was attending to a cow in the shed on the far side of the farm. She must have run the car down the incline without starting the engine and got quietly away...."

"But did nobody hear her return?"

"No. George didn't either, did you, boy?"

"No. I found Lee's torch in the ditch by the gate. I looked for it after you'd mentioned it when you called here, Inspector. When I saw it, I knew again what had happened."

"And you still did nothing?"

"What did you want me to do? Hand the girl over to you or send her off to an asylum. She was as sane as any of us if she'd been left alone, but people just wouldn't do it. Between you ... Prank, Lee, you damned police, you've killed her...."

“That will do, George. You’re not helping in the matter by getting in a rage. The Inspector wants the story to complete the case. He’s had it. Now, Inspector, I gather you’re satisfied and will leave me to my grief....”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m afraid I’m not satisfied at all. In fact, Mr. George’s share in matters is far from clear. He claims to have protected his sister throughout. I say that he did the opposite. He used her as a stalking-horse to further his own ends. In fact, I’m so convinced of it, that I’m taking him back to the police station with me.”

The old man’s jaw fell.

George scrambled to his feet galvanised by a convulsion of rage.

“What hellish nonsense is this?”

“There’s no nonsense about it, Emmott. In fact, the matter is so serious that I have taken out a warrant for your arrest. George Emmott, I arrest you in connection with the murder of Samuel Prank, and I warn you that ...”

George Emmott sprang to the corner where stood a sporting gun and seizing it, covered Littlejohn dramatically.

“Get out, or I’ll blow the guts out of you. My father has enough trouble without you blasted police concocting more of it....”

“Put that gun down, George,” said old Emmott sternly, like one talking to a four-year-old.

“No. Not until this fellow puts the door between us and him.”

“I want to know what all this is about, Inspector. You make a serious and ridiculous charge and I want to know why,” insisted Saul Emmott, ignoring George now.

The old man seemed invulnerable. Either age and surfeit of trouble, or the accumulation of catastrophe had dulled his feelings. Or else he saw a grain of truth in Littlejohn’s accusation.

Littlejohn, knowing George’s excitable nature, made no move towards the door to summon his colleagues, but stood his ground in face of the gun.

“Perhaps Mr. George will tell me, then, why he created a false alibi for himself on the night Prank was killed.”

“What are you talking about?” roared George. “I’ve already told you fully of my movements and had the whole of them confirmed by Winterbottom.”

“Would it surprise you to know that on that night, Winterbottom got home at ten-thirty blind drunk and was put to bed by his kennel-maid. You

thought that since the death of his wife, Winterbottom had lived alone and nobody could check his movements. Now, however, he is philandering with the kennel-girl, who has started to sleep in and who put him to bed, as I said. The day following she overheard you impressing on him details of the tragedy at the swing-bridge and that it was around eleven o'clock when you crossed the swing-bridge together...."

"Utter rot!"

"The girl swears those details are correct. I suggest that you took Winterbottom home, and he was quite oblivious to what was going on around him or the time, by way of the *old* bridge. You set him on his way home in time for you to return to keep the appointment with Prank. Having disposed of Sam, to give verisimilitude to your tale about Winterbottom, you then hurried round and took a ticket over the swing-bridge. You arranged for me to come upon this ticket, apparently by accident, because you put your own coat under my hat on the peg in the hall, and I took it away with me. You took me in for a time, for I did as you expected; I checked the contents of the pockets to make sure it wasn't mine, and swallowed your bait by looking into the matter of the ticket. You thought of everything. I must confess, however, I couldn't understand how I came to take your coat instead of my own...."

George stood transfixed as though in wonder at this apparent reading of his thoughts by the detective. The gun remained steady, however.

Something was holding George in check. Of that Littlejohn was quite sure. Then, it dawned what it was. George was on his best behaviour for his father's benefit. If he could keep his father's favour and convince him that Littlejohn's was a cock-and-bull story, he was safe, for the old man would now leave him as sole legatee under his Will, and master of Headlands!

"All a fantastic fable," he said at last. "A damned fairy story. You've not a shred of proof. You know my poor sister did it when not herself. Now you want another victim...."

Saul Emmott intervened.

"It seems to me Inspector, George is right. I'll be glad if you'll leave us now. I'm too tired to listen to your theories...."

"Hear me out, sir, please, and judge for yourself. George knew of Miss Nancy's hiding-place in the woodshed. After he had killed Lee, he hid the letters there and the rubber truncheon which he had used on both his

victims. He took great pains to remind Mercy of the hiding place. Mercy told me that just now. He knew I'd question Mercy and that probably after the way he'd emphasised it, she would be sure to mention it. She also told me that Nancy fled, not because she—Nancy—had found her hiding-place rifled, for to her recollection she'd hidden nothing there for a long time. Not since the letters were stolen from the oven by Prank. No. It was because George *told* her I'd found the letters and that she would be accused as the only one who knew the hidey-hole. He also told her that they'd put her in an asylum for what she'd done...."

"All damned lies. I said nothing of the kind. How long are you going to stand for this, father?"

"I want to know how much truth there is in this, George. You deny it. But I've never known Mercy tell a lie. If she's told this story to the Inspector, there must be some truth in it. Now, George, I want to hear what you really did say."

"Very well. Mercy told Nancy that Littlejohn had been nosing in the wood-shed. I then told Nancy that I knew what she'd done. I said I was afraid she'd be put in a home if the police found anything incriminating...."

Littlejohn was tired of hearing George's lame excuses. He was anxious to be getting on with the job.

"Please let me continue.... Mercy also tells me that for some time she has overheard George suggesting to his sister that she was losing her memory. He kept accusing her of doing things she hadn't really done—or said she hadn't done, and then he'd swear she *had* done them and destroy her confidence in herself. He started saying she was sleep-walking.... She'd had a period of similar mental trouble before, I understand, when, unhinged by the death of her mother, she had to be carefully watched...."

"That is true," said Saul Emmott.

"George took advantage of that for his own dastardly ends. He set about laying a trail of guilt leading to his sister and trying to undermine her own mental state, so that she would be unable to believe whether she had done what she was accused of, or not...."

George looked at his father to see how he was taking it. He was still holding himself wonderfully in restraint to keep the old man from being suspicious. Saul Emmott sat there like a figure of stone.

“You told your sister that you had found her bed empty on the night of the crime and, doubtless, you added you’d found her either wandering on the quay or else coming home. You asked her what she’d done to Lee.... In other words, you drove her half crazy and at the same time used her to cover your own crimes.”

“Enough of this! Why should I do that to my own sister? Get out, or I’ll fill you with lead ...!”

“Wait, George. Continue, Inspector. This links up with some ideas I’ve had on the matter myself now I come to ponder things. Although I’m tied to my chair, I don’t miss everything.”

Saul Emmott’s keen gaze left the Inspector’s face and fixed on his son like a gimlet.

“At first, I myself suspected Miss Emmott of committing the crimes in fits of dementia. Mercy assured me, however, that Nancy was never so bad. Then, this afternoon, I saw her attack her brother. I realised that she could never have struck either Prank or Lee the blows that rendered them unconscious. Her method of attack was too unpracticed, too feeble by half and her strength was far from demoniac. You preyed so much on your sister’s mind that she was even prepared to attack *you*, whom she thought her best friend, rather than risk capture and the asylum you cunningly dangled before her...”

“It’s a damned lie! You can’t prove it. Why should I do it. Father, order this man out ... or let me deal with him....

The old man said nothing.

“Now, listen to me, George Emmott. Mercy tells me you were the cause of the quarrel between your elder brother, Henry, and your father, with the result that ... no, no, don’t interrupt me ... with the result that Henry was cut-off with a shilling and went to sea. Police records show that another older brother died from a gun accident, the verdict of which was accidental death, though many said it was suicide. *You* found the body. You’ve been discreetly preparing the way for this final perfidy on your sister, by whispering it round the town that there is insanity in your family. You needn’t deny it.... I have reputable witnesses....”

“What does this mean?” thundered old Emmott now livid and writhing in his chair....

“Your son has put it abroad that another member of the family, your brother, sir, is in an asylum suffering from an hereditary taint. I learn from Mercy that that, too, is untrue, as Mr. Simon suffered head injuries which made him epileptic....”

“That is the truth and if George told otherwise ...”

“I did no such thing, father.... Can’t you see it all is a put-up job....”

“Let me go on, please. You can argue afterwards. The last-mentioned statement has undoubted authority behind it.”

“You swine.... Are you trying to pin Leonard’s death on me, too, because I happened to find him?”

“I’m suggesting nothing, except commenting that one by one the other members of this family have been eliminated in spectacular fashion from between you and your father’s money and the farm....”

“You can’t prove a thing, even if there’s any truth in your crack-brained idea, which there isn’t....”

“I grant that the misfortunes of your two elder brothers are past history and cold mutton as far as this case is concerned, but your sister is a different matter. Murder in hot blood is one thing; cold premeditated murder is another. But calculated devilment of the kind I’m now explaining is the most damnable of all. To take a mind not too strong to begin with, break it down until it doesn’t know whether or not the body is in some way acting independently of it, and then coolly to pin two ghastly crimes on the victim is about the most fiendish device of all. I’m quite convinced in my own mind that you did that, George Emmott, and I shall not rest until I’ve proved it one way or the other. And if I find to my satisfaction that my theory is correct, I’ll see you hang for it....”

Littlejohn had let himself go more than he intended. The two men, Saul Emmott, seated, and George, still standing aggressively holding the gun, were like carved figures. The old man, paralysed by the horror of what he was hearing; the younger, speechless with rage.

“Why ... you ... you ...”

Another convulsion shook George and he poked the gun at Littlejohn

“George! Stop! Let the Inspector continue. You shall have the opportunity of defending yourself later.”

The old man was sitting in judgment on the pair of them now. He exercised an uncanny control over his excitable son, and Littlejohn himself

had never felt in all his experience of judges, such a sense of being weighed in the balance by stern justice.

“Your sister alone remained in the end to share the inheritance with you. You were terrified lest she should marry and bring a husband to take her part. You even put it around covertly that there was insanity in the family, as I just remarked, and broke-up at their beginnings, chances she had of romance, if not marriage. Finally, Boake’s letters entered the scene. You’d long been afraid of Prank. Nancy had apparently set her mind firmly on him and you couldn’t dislodge him as you’d done the rest. He, too, perhaps fancied her or her prospects of wealth. When he started to flourish Boake’s letters about, he put the last nail in his coffin. You’d long hated him. This was the last straw. You knew he was to meet Boake’s messenger on the dark quay at a certain time, and you were there. You not only killed him, but threw suspicion on your sister, because he’d not only stolen her letters, but affronted her by trying to sell them on top of jilting her. In a fury at Lee, you did the same to him. You found killing easy after the first success. All you wanted was to put Nancy in an asylum, and get the farm and your father’s wealth for yourself when he died....”

Littlejohn knew he was taking risks in speaking his mind. Such thoughts had come to him since the death of Nancy, and Mercy had strengthened them. There was, however, great danger in voicing them, but it was all or nothing now for the Inspector.

“Well, George?”

The old man cast a searching glance at his son.

“Well *what*?”

“What have you to say? One or the other of you is crazy.”

“It’s all lies.... Not a word of truth in it. Can’t you see he’s trying to trap me ...?”

“You’re lying, George. You never were a good liar. I always know when you’re lying. Now ... the truth!”

George suddenly lost control under his father’s glassy stare. “I fear thee and thy glittering eye.” Littlejohn had to confess to himself that he, too, felt the stern compulsion of the old man’s look, like that of the Ancient Mariner....

“Oh, stop badgering me! I’m not a kid any longer that you can bully and push around. I *did* do it, if you want to know, and I’m glad of it. I killed

Prank because Nancy said she would marry him whatever he did and whoever he was! Lee, I killed because he saw me on the quay at the time of the crime and asked what would I pay him to keep quiet. This farm's been ours for generations. What would Prank have made of it? If Nancy'd married, he'd have frittered it all away...."

He pointed a thick finger at his father.

"What did you want *four* children for? Two hundred acres and a house between four! It makes me sick. Where would it have been? Nowhere. *My* heritage, fifty acres and a quarter share of a house ...! In any case, Harry wouldn't have made a farmer. Leonard was a waster and would have squandered it on booze and women. Nancy was a spoiled darling, wanting only to be humoured and waited upon. But me ... the land's a part of me. I seem to grow out of it. It's mine. But you insisted on sharing it out. It's all your fault this has happened! I had to stop you carving it up. By God, I did! I'll stop anybody else who threatens my birthright, too. That includes you, as well, Mister clever Scotland Yard.... I'm going to blow a hole in you now large enough to drive a horse and cart through, for all your pains. And I shall say it was an accident. My father will confirm it, won't you father? You won't part with the last of your children and have nobody to take over Headlands when you've gone, will you, dad? But from now on, I'm boss. I've proved I'm worthy to be the boss instead of you, father, so here's where I take over."

George Emmott turned his back on the old man, faced Littlejohn full-square, and levelled the gun at him.

Littlejohn felt himself go suddenly cold all over. Here was a maniac indeed, crazed with rage and frustration, one who would stop at nothing. The Inspector felt curiously detached, as though his spirit were watching his body in a tight corner. He found himself wondering if Letty would manage on his life insurance....

Suddenly occurred something so astonishing, that it was as much as Littlejohn could do to keep from warning George of it by an expression or cry of surprise.

Saul Emmott, his face contorted by a violent spasm of energy and effort, raised himself to his full height by bracing his arms on those of his chair and suddenly straightening them. He towered above his son for a fraction of

a second and then, as George half-turned in alarm, scenting danger, fell full length on top of him.

The gun went off with a mighty roar and a picture on the wall, just to the left of Littlejohn, received a full charge of shot. One minute two stern looking gentlemen in top hats and frock coats were staring fixedly from their frame; the next there was just a hole where they had been. Cromwell and Hoggatt tore in alarmed, took in the situation, and pinioned George Emmott. Littlejohn gently raised the old man and seated him in his chair.

Saul Emmott regarded his son with furious contempt, and gave judgment.

“Take him away and hang him,” he said and collapsed unconscious.

“You can’t prove anything. You can’t prove a thing,” yelled the livid and demented captive struggling in handcuffs between Cromwell and Hoggatt. “My father is a half-dotty old man, who won’t testify against me and nothing on earth can make him. I shall deny anything you tell, Littlejohn. My sister committed the crimes as I told you, and you can’t prove it otherwise. I haven’t said anything different from that and nobody else can say I did....”

From the larder tottered a little figure with a grim, yellow, wedge-shaped face, the lips of which were tight pressed with determination. Her eyes were red with weeping.

“I heard it all.... I heard it all. Every bit of it, I heard. I knew it all before you said it. I told the gentleman so. You did it all yourself and druv poor Miss Nancy mad and to her grave with your cunning. I’ll tell the judge all of it, I will, in the court. I’ll testify on my oath.... I heard all you said just now, and I’ll say I did when the gentleman tells the judge.”

And Mercy, the meek guardian of the family in the past, walked to the raving George and soundly slapped his face.

“There. Take that and stop your noise.... It’s a long time since I gave you one of those, isn’t it? But you’ve deserved that one.”

The effect was strangely instantaneous. George grew quiet and surly like a whipped child and allowed himself to be led off without another word.

George Emmott’s counsel tried to convince the jury that he was insane. It was proved that there was no hereditary madness in the family and that

George's principal mental handicap was a violent and unruly temper towards all who frustrated him, except his father.

Mercy, in the case, proved singularly merciless in her testimony. By her simple honesty in telling the tale of George's slow breaking of his sister's mind, combined with the letters recovered by Littlejohn from the hidey-hole and the sordid story of the drunken veterinery surgeon, she fashioned a rope for young Emmott's neck. He was sentenced to death and hanged.

Henry Emmott came home from the sea to his father and the farm. The old man is as well as can be expected and Mercy looks after them both.

Further items of gossip might be recorded for the satisfaction of those who are interested.

The Coroner had a lot of tidying up to do when the police had caught the criminal.

For one single great day, the Prank-Lee affair totally eclipsed Hitler and his war in the *Werrymouth Observer*. As if the resumption of the inquest on Harriet Prank, with the story of Jane's perfidy and ultimate removal in a plain van, were not enough, Mr. Jackson gave overflowing measure by passing on to the inquests on Mr. Boake and Nancy Emmott.

This spate of enquiries shook the town. The edition of the local paper was sold out almost before it left the presses. The Coroner and his lady immediately took on a new lease of social distinction and had the satisfaction of seeing the report of Lady Bromiloe's garden party for bombed-out cats and dogs crowded out of the news and held over for three days.

Instead of a press snapshot showing her Ladyship declaring the fête champêtre (as she called it) open—a performance for which she posed alone and had the platform cleared for the purpose—there appeared a more sensational substitute showing Mr. Jackson entering the Ancient Mariners' Hall for the inquests. The photographer caught him unaware. He looks furtive, you will observe, if you are lucky enough to see the picture of him. Like an adulterer stealing in by the back door at Pleasant Street. Perhaps there were seagulls about, poised for a further anointing....

Playfair wanted his old friends to stay on a little longer but they had had enough of Werrymouth and district.

It's twins this time, wrote Mrs. Littlejohn from Rugby. *Yesterday I made some plum jam. Heaven knows they'll need something to fill all these*

mouths on one parson's salary and the offertories on the down grade. Won't you call on your way home and try the jam, even if you're not enthusiastic about the twins ...?

Like a breath of fresh air from a saner world! Littlejohn and his colleague hastily packed and got the train for London, via Rugby. Cromwell was carrying a box of dabs which he had caught for his wife at first light, believing them to be very nourishing. As we have probably stated earlier, Cromwell's wife was shortly expecting to make him a father. Cromwell was sure it would be a boy and in his anxious enthusiasm, left his dabs on the rack when he changed trains.

A little while ago, Littlejohn became godfather to Miss Jane Elizabeth Cromwell, a piece of interesting gossip for those who admire Cromwell, but nothing whatever to do with Sam Prank and Rosie Lee, thank God!

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